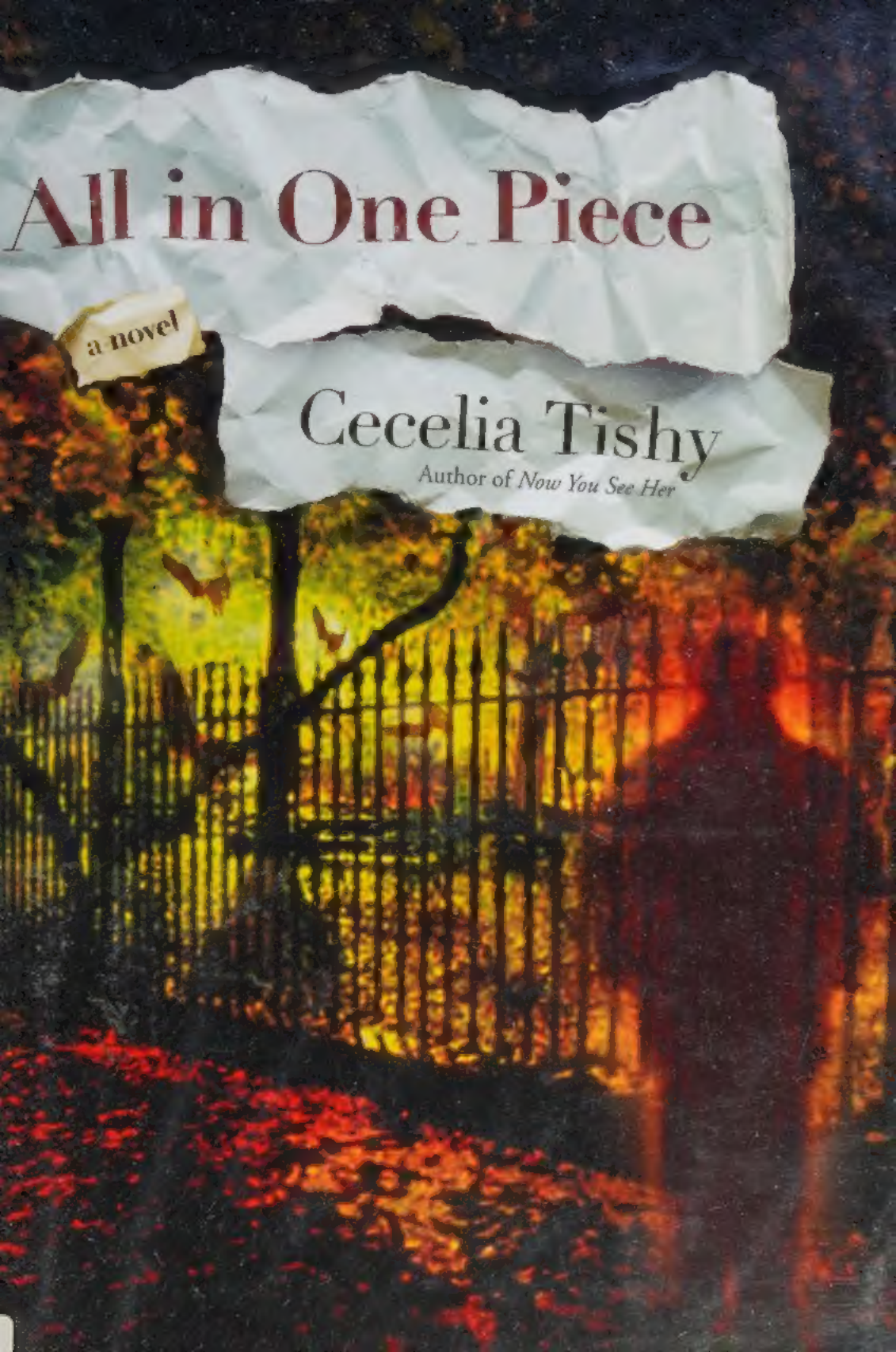
All in One Piece

a novel

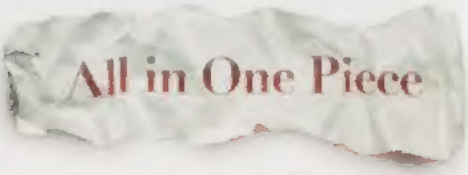
Cecelia Tishy

Author of *Now You See Her*



$24.95
($33.95 in Canada)

Critics and readers alike have hailed Cecelia Tishy's new detective Reggie Cutter as "an appealing mix of...enthusiasm and derring-do" (*Publishers Weekly*). Dumped for a trophy wife, the forty-something divorcée has started life over with an inherited Boston town house, a beagle co-owned by a tough biker...*and a surprising paranormal ability*. Now, in this new novel, Reggie uncovers a terrifying truth that will shatter her world...



Reggie Cutter doesn't need her psychic powers to realize that the small blue car is going to hit her. Clipped right in front of her home in the South End, she finds herself bruised, battered, and gratefully accepting the help of her new upstairs tenant. Steven Damelin is charming and chatty, a young financial analyst who not only knew Reggie's beloved Aunt Jo, also a psychic, but was involved in a "deal" with Jo just before she died. A deal he's just as eager to sell to Reggie.

But he never gets the chance. Shortly after dawn the next day, Reggie makes two horrifying discoveries: Steven's gruesomely mutilated body in his room—and bizarre blood marks that look like Chinese

(continued on back flap)

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Also by Cecelia Tishy

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CECELIA TISHY

NEW YORK BOSTON

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Mysterious Press
Warner Books

Time Warner Book Group
1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020
Visit our Web site at www.twbookmark.com

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition: March 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Tichy, Cecelia
All in one piece / Cecelia Tichy. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN-13: 978-0-89296-797-1
ISBN-10: 0-89296-797-8
1. Women detectives—Massachusetts—Boston—Fiction. 2. Boston (Mass.)—Fiction. 3. Psychics—Fiction. I. Title.
PS3570.I726A79 2006
813'.54—dc22 2005023638

Again, for Bill

Digitized by the Internet Archive
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Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/allinonepiece0000tish

Acknowledgments

First thanks go to Bill Tichi the first reader who never flags Mystery writer Coach Del Tinsley knows the craft and the market and gives the best informal seminars an author can get At Time Warners Mysterious Press, editors Beth DeGuzman and Frances Jaffet Miller have been exemplary readers at every stage and once again Bill Betts copyedited with scrupulous attention and kept an eagle eye on the calendar Their advice and guidance have been invaluable Thanks also to Susan Richman and Kristen Weber and to my agent Meredith Bernstein Appreciation also to Anna Curry who taught me the intricacies of crew and to scholar equestrian Eliza M Grew for a wonderful day of tutorials. Gratitude, as always, goes to my readers

All in One Piece

Chapter One

I've never been a careless person. Crossing the street, I look both ways. Of course I do. My reflexes are razor sharp, and I'm a brisk walker. At the end of this city block, a small blue car is moving slowly up Barlow Square as I tug my dog's lead and step off the curb at a good clip.

The car speeds up, its squealing tires a signal that it's gaining on me. The dog trots ahead, but my gut radar says step it up. A power walker in slacks and a sweater, I clutch my purse **and, stupidly, a hot latte in my right hand.**

The car is racing. My left arm signals slow down. Instead, it speeds up. The dog tugs, and I grip the latte and break into a run. There's too much glare to see the driver. The sidewalk is just a few feet ahead. The dog springs to the curb. The car aims **like a missile. I sprint.**

Bam — it clips me. I pitch forward. Knee and elbow strike the asphalt, and the latte arcs and splashes as I sprawl flat, my handbag flying as pain rockets to my shoulder. My cheek

smacks into a pool of steaming coffee and the car speeds off, the car that hit me. Spangles of light flash behind my eyes as the dog whines and everything goes black.

Do minutes pass? Seconds? I'm still here in the street, sipping air too winded to move. I breathe a mix of coffee, tailpipe exhaust, and burning rubber. The pavement is cold and my knee is on fire.

Footsteps. I hear footsteps.

Are you all right? A tenor voice at my ear says, "I saw you fall. Can you speak?"

My lips are gritty, my mouth full of sand and stones. My eyes water from the pain. Quietly I spit.

Let's get you off the street. Don't worry, your dog is right here. Strong arms tug at my good arm. I see ruddy cheeks, chestnut hair, and soft gray eyes. He wears a bomber jacket like the one I sent my son, Jack, last winter. Confused, I murmur, "Jack—"

"No. Steven."

Steven, of course. It's Steven Damelin, my new upstairs tenant. He holds the dog's head, and Biscuit stays close at my side as I limp a step or two. My calf— Pain scissors the back of my right leg where the bumper hit. There's no sign of the hit-and-run car. "Did you see the license plate?" My voice quavers.

Here, he says, sit down on the curb. The little cap sails away in a chill gust of October wind. Biscuit whines. No one else is on the sidewalk.

It was blue. I shiver. A small car, maybe Japanese.

"Maybe a BMW."

Nausea rolls in waves. My slacks are ripped at the knee. Blood seeps through. I wipe a sleeve across my wet cheek. It's as though it aimed for me. It came right at me.

You crossed at mid-block. He gets my hard bag from the

street and holds it awkwardly. "Can you move your arms and legs? Try to move."

I do. Everything hurts. My best wool slacks ruined. Nothing seems broken. It takes great energy to say this. I'm winded, bruised, maybe sprained. Fracture? I look up at his kind face, a man in his early thirties. "That car came right at me."

"I saw you fall. I saw you from my window on the second floor. Let's get you inside."

Clutching his arm, I rise and smell his aftershave—tropical lime in humid midautumn Boston. The granite stoop is torture. These Victorian brick town houses all have high steps, a stretch even for a beagle. I take my bag and fumble for keys to the outside door, then to my vestibule entrance.

"Let me help you into your place, Ms. Cutter."

Cutter? Yes, it is my name, although I'm still getting used to it after twenty-five years as Mrs. Martin Baynes and as Gina, which was my ex's, Marty's, choice. But now it's back to Reggie, which was my childhood nickname here in this South End town house that I inherited from my late Aunt Jo.

"Step in, Ms. Cutter."

"Reggie," I say, then pass my voice above the pain in my elbow and knee. "Call me Reggie."

He guides me to the love seat, settles me against the cushions, and unclips Biscuit's lead. She sits. I unzip my bag and grope for the phone. I'm calling the police.

"Let me get you some ice. Try to relax."

But my cell phone's dead. I take out a Kleenex and daub my bloody knee, a city Purple Heart after years in the sanctuary of the scourges, where the biggest risk is a double espresso at Starbucks.

Was the latte my undoing? Free of that cup, would I have

beaten the bumper, or would the driver have chased me onto the sidewalk? What if the dog hadn't jumped in time?

Stop the mental replay, Reggie. Take comfort in your new home of these last months, surrounded by Aunt Jo's familiar old furniture, the bentwood rocker, kilim rugs, chenille throw, books crammed everywhere. A few of my own pieces are in place as well. As Marty's long-term corporate wife, I got my share of nice things and brought a few of them when the divorce was finalized and I moved to Boston last winter. None of it comforts me now.

"Let's put these on your knee and elbow."

Steven offers two neat packets of cracked ice in Ziplocs wrapped in kitchen towels. I think him. Would my own, grown kids be this attentive? Jack would skip the towels. Molly would turn the ice pack into a funky art object. Or am I just feeling sorry for myself? "Look outside at the street," I say. "About ten feet up from my VW Beetle, see the coffee spill?"

"Yes."

"That's where the car hit me."

"You crossed at midblock."

"Do you think the driver was joyriding?"

"I doubt it."

"Or some kind of initiation rite?"

"No way."

"Or somebody who's seen too many action movie car chases? Or plays video games? Because it aimed at me."

"I'm sure the driver didn't see you. It was an accident."

"Spell at me. Another second crossing that street, I'd be in . . ." The word is "morgue," but I say, "ICU."

"Perhaps you're not quite used to the city."

"You think I was jaywalking?"

He points at my scuffed, dirty handbag. "A little saddle soap, it should clean up nicely."

"It was hit-and-run."

But his eyes do not meet mine.

"Hit-and-run," I repeat.

He gives me the same pitiful caregiver look that the hospital aides gave my aunt in her final days last winter.

"I'm calling the police right now."

"Why not give the ice a chance to work first?" He faces me in Jo's rocker, obviously at ease in my late aunt's home. Well, that's why I agreed to the six-month sublet—because Steven Damelin knew my late aunt. Otherwise I'd require the long-term tenant—a dentist, to meet his lease obligations while he tests experimental novocaine in developing countries, meaning the parts of the world that Marty called Emerging Markets, as if those places don't have actual names.

"Steven, please hand me the phone on that table. I want to call the police, actually a certain detective."

"Your Aunt Jo's favorite detective? Is he yours now?"

My favorite? I'd never call Homicide Detective Francis Devaney anybody's personal detective, not Jo's and certainly not my own. Is Steven Damelin being ironic? The detective is an acquaintance, I say. "It's on a professional basis."

"So you work for cops too. Are you a psychic, like your aunt?"

What to say to this? Psychic, as you know, is a touchy topic. Skeptics sneer in disbelief, while true believers think you're an extraterrestrial. Both sides expect a *Twilight Zone* trick instantly.

"Your aunt told me psychic powers run in families."

"That's true. But abilities vary, Steven. It's not like the TV shows—instantly *on* and flowing like tap water. Jo was very advanced, probably because she embraced her sixth sense throughout her lifetime. The paranormal faculty needs, well, a certain

cultivation. It's like, use it or lose it. For me, it's a relatively recent thing. Let's say that I'm playing catch-up with my psychic ability. I have a learner's permit."

"But you're the next generation of Cutter psychics. So let me tell you, that detective kept your Aunt Jo busy. Between Boston crime and the terrorism threats, you'll be in high demand."

Steven Damelin seems to think the first aid entitles him to full familiarity, but I'm finding this Boy Scout a bit too brash. "Jo took her psychic ability very seriously," I say. "She considered it a great responsibility. It was as serious as her teaching career."

"Oh yes, I know. You see that glass bottle there on the top bookshelf?"

I turn. "The pale green glass?"

"It's an old whiskey bottle handed down from my family. I gave it to Jo. That's when I found out she was psychic. She said when she held it, the bottle gave her a picture of people yelling and a skull cracked too."

Oh.

"But she accepted the gift because she also felt strong currents of hope. She said teaching high school was an act of hope too." He shrugs. "I mean, whatever. I'm from an old mill town north of Boston, and it was just a bottle around the house when I was a kid. I thought your aunt would like it. She liked old stuff. The psychic reaction, it was like an allergy."

He sounds too flip. "Jo Cutter never trifled with her psychic power," I say. "Until her final days, she used her sixth sense for the cause of criminal justice and was equally committed to social justice. To her, the two were entwined, and her community activism was legendary. That's how you met her, right, Steven?" This is a prompt. I want to hear him recite what I already know from my Realtor friend's background check on this man, who is

a financial analyst needing a place for a few months while his new condo is renovated.

Steven pushes back his thick chestnut hair. His face is open and eager. "That's right. I met Jo through the Big Buddies mentoring program. She's the reason I got linked up with Luis. We go to movies, shoot pool, sit together in the bleachers at Sox games. His mother works two jobs, no dad in the picture. How's that elbow—?"

"The cold feels good."

"Okay. Anyway, I try to keep Luis in school, help him with homework projects. He's already taller than me. Fifteen years old, and he's pushing six feet. I'm starting to talk to him about college. But yeah, your Aunt Jo got the program organized. What a dynamo. It seems like she was in every good cause in the South End, maybe the whole city. Retirement didn't slow her down one bit. She had a gang of us here for chowder once. I remember this cute dog." He reaches down to scratch Biscuit's rump and admires her markings. "This was Jo's dog, wasn't it? I guess she's yours now."

"Yes, you could say Biscuit's mine." In fact, she's half mine. Jo willed her equally to two owners. Don't ask me why.

"This dog's a chowder hound. Jo made the best chowder in New England."

"Steven, I ate it as a child in this very house."

"You must have your aunt's recipe."

But I don't. To Marty, shellfish are the filth of the sea. He likes Omaha steaks. I could run the grill at Morton's or the Palm or Ruth's Chris. The chowder, I say. Jo made it by heart. The moment sags. Biscuit lies down. I shift the ice packs.

Steven says, "Reggie, you're perfectly free to call the police, but do you really want the aggravation?"

"Someone hit me. I m a citizen I have a duty '

"First duty to yourself You re upset You need to rest for a while."

"Resting isn't my style The police need to know about the hit-and-- But I realize Steven won't corroborate my story He'll call it an accident and say I was jaywalking, in effect discredit me 'Steven, you've been wonderful, but I must let you get back upstairs to work I have some things to do Reggie, I tell myself, assert your authority as landlady "Is everything okay upstairs' Are you getting enough heat'"

It s toasty, everything s great Let me see your eyes checking for dilation."

"I'm fine."

But he plants himself in the rocker So here s something to think about, Reggie You could use some good cheer today Here's an opportunity " Suddenly the medic sounds like a telemarketer One way or another, I want him out Every joint and muscle cries its protest as I swing my legs down and sit straight inching forward to signal *enough*

"Your Aunt Jo and I got close over the last year before she got sick, Reggie There was a deal we were working on together We kept it confidential Something good for both of us I d like to tell you about it as soon as you feel better Maybe you d be interested."

Maybe some other time Deal was Marty's mantra, a word I can't stand.

A very favorable investment As conservative as your aunt was about money, she saw the wisdom of this deal

Steven, from now on, I m a woman of modest means "

His smile broadens No problem There are ways '

Maybe we can talk about it in a week or so

And that ends it for now The light is fading, but Steven s

smile is a halogen lamp. The youngish man silhouetted in my door frame -that's the parting image Sometimes I think back and wish it was just that innocent, a moment when time hung still—just before events again shoved me from behind, shoved me with a force of flesh and bone smashed against cold rock Shoved me so hard that today's hit-and-run was just a teaser

Chapter Two

Let me summarize the next hours, a countdown to disaster. I bandage my knee, pop pain pills, eat a light meal on Jos. A. Bestaware and decide with huge reluctance not to call Detective Frank Devaney. It's about my credibility. Under questioning, I'd say hit-and-run, while Steven would insist that I jaywalked. My Boston police "street cred" would go down the drain in a heartbeat, she said, waste of Devaney's time. Worst of all, I could seem like a drama queen, the psychic who cries wolf. Devaney could decide to handle his cases without the help of psychic Reggie Cutter, the cornerstone of my Boston life, ramming it to dust. The Homicide Division work, my life's fizz and sizzle, hints. I work as a volunteer on an unofficial basis. I can't risk it.

By 10:00 p.m. I reluctantly sink down into bed, vowing to rethink the whole thing in the morning. I've always been a fairly sound sleeper, but something goes to camp on the night even with the heating pipes banging now and then. I hear thudding

rumbling. Biscuit gets restless, growls, and barks, and I let her onto the bed to calm her down. Fitful sleep, no rest.

At last, dawn. Slipping a raincoat over my robe, I take Biscuit out and then feed her. Downing pain pills and coffee, I simply sit in the front room, too sore and sleepy to turn on a radio. The swelling in knee and elbow is down. My gaze is drawn to the top shelf's green whiskey bottle that Jo held in her hands, surprising Steven when his gift became a psychic prompt. I, too, must touch a thing to read it. The bottle is a curiosity, but my main thought at the moment is that the whole shelf needs dusting.

So I sit, rethinking a call to Devaney. And the dripping at first sounds clocklike. Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . drip. The intervals are irregular even to my so-so musical ear. All right, get up and check the faucets. From the kitchen to the bath, no leaks, no droplets.

A second coffee poured, I sit back down. Still the insistent drops. Is it a leaking radiator? The roof? Boston's having a wet autumn, but it's doubtful that the roof—anyway, my ceiling is Steven Damelin's floor, so it's unlikely that a leak would escape his notice. Maybe one of his sinks is stoppered, his bathtub overflowing.

Wide-awake, I go room to room scanning the ceiling. Plaster, moldings, everything's okay starting from the two bedrooms in back, mine and the smaller second one, which is the study. Then to the bathroom off the hall, forward to the kitchen, once again to the hall and back to the front room right to the corner behind the sofa—

Where I see the spatter on the floor by the radiator.

Droplets dashed on the hardwood have formed a small puddle. A phase of my Molly's art flashes, her Pollock period. I lean down and touch and smell it. That iron odor. The darkening red.

Biscuit, no, get away from there. I push her back and scoop

her into my arms. Then a drop falls into my hair, sticky wet on my scalp.

I look up. Drops are falling where the steam pipe runs from my radiator upstairs to Steven's.

From Steven's down onto my floor.

Let it be paint.

Let it be enamel, finger paint, rustproofing, any kind of paint. Pray for paint. Because in that frozen moment, denial is the lifeline. Please, God, paint. Because the minute you let go, the world will rupture forever.

Dashing upstairs, I try Steven's door—locked from inside—and bang the brass knocker. And slam my palm on the door panel. And I scream his name.

Tripping on my robe going back downstairs, I ask, where's that key? Where did I put the key to the upstairs flat? In the hall table drawer. The dog squirms and yelps, but I hold her tight against me and root among coupons, stamps, rubber bands. No key.

The phone book—nutty, but I call Steven's number—tethered by the cord of one of Jo's old land line phones. Fourth ring, and here's his upbeat voice: "Leave me a message."

Back to that spot by the heat pipe. The slow drip. The pool of blood. Then I remember—the key is on a hook by the kitchen window. I grab the key, dash upstairs, open the door—and find fifties sixties furniture, fake zebra pillows, boomerang tables all rumbled and knocked over. A sideways Lava lamp forms a slow blue belch.

Biscuit leaps, dives, and hits the floor. "Here, Biscuit!" But she barks frantically and runs to the next room. "Come here! Here!" She's back a moment later, her white muzzle stained, her paw marks rusty red against my robe.

Back and forth she runs as if to show the way, barking and whining me to Steven's radiator.

First a sneakered foot, then a jacked-up knee. Then his body lying on its back, a twisted mannequin, arms out stiff, something dangling from the wrists, dark strips, like shoelaces. Mouth open, a ridge of teeth, wax museum eyes that stare at nothing.

And so much blood, his shirtfront mapped in blood, continents of blood. Small blood circles up and down his arms are a polka-dot pox of wounds that weep.

The floor slants, I retch, grab at a wall, stumbling on something hard that slides when my foot kicks at it—a yellow drill that's slick with blood—the murder weapon, could it be?

It touched the hem of my robe.

Then something else. I lean close to see—nailheads. They pin down the skin of Steven's calf and ankle, and his wrists and neck too. A few inches apart, they stretch the skin tight. It looks upholstered, like a button back sofa. Human flesh treated like upholstery. I lean closer and fight for balance. It takes everything not to throw up.

Chapter Three

Sudden as lightning, the thought that a killer could still be inside. In his kitchen, a back bedroom?

I grab the dog, run back downstairs, slam my door, and call 911. Unreality sets in, like a jerky handheld camera. Whose voice do I hear reporting a dead body at 27 Barlow Square? Whose words say the unspeakable? Me and not me. Steven and not Steven.

The patrol car comes fast, the cop like on TV. I give him Steven's key.

"Lady, you stay inside here."

Still in my robe, I slip into moccasins. Stupid quandary: can I dress? Is a witness required to stay as is? For that matter, am I a witness?

"Settle down, Biscuit," I say as much to myself as to the dog. The sight of Steven Damerin. My gorge rises.

More sirens, then heavy footfalls upstairs.

Steven's leg, his splayed fingers and purpled throat. Those strips. The nails.

The lights of patrol cars flash up and down Barlow Square. Blue uniforms are everywhere on the sidewalk out front. Clutching my robe, I step outside on the stoop. Yellow crime tape already bands the front of my building like crazy gift wrap. *Police Line Do Not Cross Police Line Do Not . . .*

"Lady, get back inside."

"Yes, Officer." In the vestibule, however, I'm stopped by the sight of big rust-red smears on the outside of my own door. Did I somehow get blood on my door when I ran downstairs minutes ago? No, there's not enough blood on me to leave those marks. They don't look random. They're not smears. They're too definite. Patterned, they're patterned. They're like . . . brushstrokes.

How did they get there? Who marked my door in blood? I go inside, grab my phone, call Frank Devaney in the Homicide Division, and fight hysteria as I leave him a voice mail.

Seated near the phone, I wait out an eternity. Finally there's a knock on my door and a voice calling, "Ms. Cutter?"

"Come in, Frank," I yell, then move toward my door as it opens.

But it isn't Frank Devaney.

"I'm Detective Edward Maglia. You called 911?" Before me in the door frame stands a compact man in his late thirties, with short dark brown hair, narrow face and features. He wears a blue suit with a certain sheen, and his nails look manicured. "I'd like to ask you some questions."

"But I called Detective Devaney. I left a message for him." As if he were a custom-ordered dial-a-detective? Reggie, get a grip. "Please come in."

At the flash of the badge, he's in like a weather front. I gather my robe around me as he stares at a dishevelled woman whose

robe is stained with blood. A woman who hasn't washed after kicking that drill. The hem of my robe is streaked the color of iodine.

I didn't know whether to get dressed. Still in my robe.

Maglia nods. He's in the rocker where Steven Damelin sat less than twenty-four hours ago. I excuse myself a moment to put Biscuit in the study and close the door. Refusing coffee, Maglia opens a notebook and starts into my background. Who am I. How long have I resided here. What relation to the owner of record, Josephine Cutter?

"I am her niece and heir. My aunt died last February, of cancer, and I moved in the same month. Steven Damelin was my upstairs tenant. I spell Damelin. He moved in about a month ago. He was subletting."

"When last did you see the deceased alive?"

"Yesterday, about two in the afternoon. I was crossing the street out front here on Barlow Square with my dog, and a small blue car hit me. Hit and run, actually." His eyes narrow. I part my robe just enough to show the deep bruise on my calf and the gauze pad on the kneecap. "The car clipped me. I barely made it across. I fell forward." He stares at the gauze pad. "Face it, Reggie, Steven's murder dwarfs your near miss. Natter on about the blue car, you'll sound worse than callous. I fell forward on the pavement, I say, and Steven ran out to help and came inside with me until I felt better about an hour altogether. That's the last I saw him."

He makes a note. "So he left here at approximately three p.m." Maglia's voice is soft but probing. "As a landlady, you had a key to his apartment?"

"To his door, which is off the second floor landing."

"And you used it to enter the apartment this morning when you discovered his body? Any sign of anybody in the stairwell or

hallway?" I shake my head. "The first-floor door to the street, Ms. Cutter, was it also locked?"

"The door to the street? It's the main door at the top of the granite stoop. I'd opened it to let the uniformed cops in. It has a spring bolt. In my frantic state, had I twisted it open? Is there blood on it too? "I think it was locked."

"You're not sure?"

"I think ... surely it was. But 'surely' isn't good enough. If the killer came in the front, he or she—or they?—first had to enter through the street door, pass my door, then taxi the inside vestibule stairs up to Steven's apartment.

It hits me. Steven's killer then came back down and marked my door. The marks are Steven's own blood. Life blood, death blood. Nausea rolls from the pit of my stomach, and it's all I can do to focus on the door, the outside door that I'd paid no attention to. "I was very upset," I said. "I didn't really think about the outer front door. It wasn't on my mind." My arm and leg throb. Maglia's eyes narrow as if the lapse is a mark against me.

Like a good hostess of twenty-five years, I try to compensate, mentioning Lars and the Big Buddies charity. I tell the detective that Gibralter Realty did a background check on Steven and might provide additional information. Breathless, I also tell about the night bumping noises and the dripping. How I came to find the body. My statement lasts at most ten minutes, a monologue from hell.

"Let's go back to yesterday, Ms. Cutter. When Steven paid a visit."

"It wasn't a visit. It was first aid."

He looks as though I'm an NPR word quiz lady. Ed Maglia shows no real empathy for a civilian reeling from carnage in her own home, blood on her door. "Like I was saying, after Steven left you, he went back upstairs?"

"I assumed he was up there. He's a financial analyst. He worked part of the time in his apartment."

"But you have no actual knowledge."

"Well, no. I didn't see or hear him. I was resting from the hunt and the fall. My kitchen and bedroom are to the rear of the house, away from the square. Whoever came or went last night, I didn't see him. Or her. Them."

Magda taps a nail against his wedding band. I assume that his gun is holstered inside his suit jacket. "A few minutes ago, Ms Cutter, you referred to a nighttime thumping noise. Yet you say the building seems soundproof."

"The walls are very thick. These Victorian town houses are built like fortresses."

"When you woke up in the night and heard the bumping, the noises you called violent—"

"I didn't say violent." Or did I?

"What about voices?"

No voices. None. Should I try to make the actual thumping sounds like when you take your car in? It was like a storm. Like thunder. It felt both close and distant. Maybe it was somebody's fireworks left over from the Fourth. Or it might have been a nightmare. A dream not related to Steven—"

"Isn't that unlikely? I mean the noises woke you, isn't that right?"

"My dog was agitated. Maybe a sleeper wave was interrupted. I didn't get up and look at a clock, if that's what you're asking."

"So you heard the violent thumping noises, Ms Cutter, and stayed in bed. Can you make a best guess about the time?"

"I'd rather not. A minute ago he was all for *supposing*. Now he wants guesswork. I'm hurt and ruin victim lucky to be alive. Let's face it, though. I deliberately lounged in bed listening to a homicide in progress. Magda reminds me of Marty even

though the homicide detective looks nothing like my ex-husband. One thing I know for sure: Detective Frank Devaney wouldn't treat me like this.

"How about showing me where you saw the blood drip?" We troop to the radiator, but Maglia bars me from getting too close, as if I have no judgment on my own. He says something about getting a photographer and a tech to take a sample. "Could I see your bedroom, please?"

He follows me back, unmade bed and all, and he taps the walls, stares at the ceiling like a building inspector, opens the window and leans out to look up and down at the narrow back alley. Cold October air blows in.

I, too, try leaning out to see, but Maglia shuts the window, and we go back to the front room and sit back down. He faces me. "One reason all this is important for you, Ms. Cutter: there's a stain on your own front door. We think tests will prove it's blood."

Chapter Four

Detective Maglia, I saw the bloody door when I stepped outside moments ago. It shocked me. I don't know how it got there."

You didn't make physical contact with the door? Is that what you're saying?"

I only the knob. I grabbed the knob with my right hand and pulled the door closed behind me."

"You didn't bump the door?"

"No

'And you're sure? Because if you're sure, Ms. Cutter, then we have to investigate two possibilities. One, the probable killer either bumped the door or leaned on it for balance. In that version, the door stains are accidental."

I nod

But the second possibility is that whoever killed Steven Damelin deliberately marked your door."

I swallow and nod again.

'Suppose we go see that bloodstain on the door." He follows me into the vestibule, and we peer at the door for a full, silent moment. My worst fears are confirmed. Try as I might to see the marks as random streaks and splotches, they look shaped. They're brushstrokes. Like calligraphy.

"Any guesses about the marks, Ms. Cutter?"

"They look brushed on, don't they? Painted on. They look Oriental. Don't you think so? Maybe Japanese?" I fervently hope he'll say that I'm too upset to judge. I want him to say the eye can play tricks. "Or am I seeing things?"

He doesn't answer. "To your knowledge, is there anything in your apartment that might attract someone with violent intent?"

"I have one last mink coat in case my daughter decides she wants to wear fur." He gives me a look. Reggie, I think to myself, don't be ridiculous. "Wait. There's something Steven said to me about his relationship to my late aunt. He said she was working on some kind of deal with him."

"What kind of a deal?"

"It was confidential. He promised to tell me about it. He thought I might be interested, maybe get involved."

"Financial?"

"I have no idea."

"And did your late aunt talk about it? Maybe use a word like 'arrangement' or 'partnership'?"

"No."

"You said you were close to your aunt?"

"It was holiday visits and phone calls. It wasn't day in and day out."

"Maybe she said something offhand. Could you refresh your memory?"

"There's nothing to refresh. I told you everything." Then I hear my own voice, starting small, turning sarcastic. "Detective

Maglia, let me just say, if I knew Steven Damelin was upstairs being murdered, I'd have checked my watch and called police on the spot. I'd remember for sure whether the outside front door was locked. In fact, I might even have the killer tied up with duct tape."

I mumble something about police as public servants who need counseling skills. My credibility's washing down the gutter. Years of TV cop shows don't help. The interrogation feels somewhere between Dali's dripping watches and *NYPD Blue* with touches of *Columbo* reruns. My work with Devaney feels NA: not applicable.

Maglia's eyes are flat, as if suspicion is the only thing they know how to see. We stand awkwardly in the vestibule. I'm just trying to get the sequence of events. Ms. Cutter. Inches from my door, he puts on eyeglasses to give the blood-marked panel the closest scrutiny, as if the marks might yield secrets. As if the blood might speak.

Beside him, I shiver and fight nausea. "I'd like to get dressed now."

Not yet. Step back inside, please. A female officer and a tech are on the way. I have a few questions about when you found the body. You didn't touch anything in the apartment?

"No, but my dog ran ahead and — got bloodstains on her paws and muzzle. And the drill. I didn't see it at first. I accidentally kicked it."

He frowns his disapproval. Yes. I disturbed a crime scene.

"Did you see a hammer?"

"No."

"Or a nail gun?"

I wouldn't know a nail gun if I saw one. Detective Maglia." A memory flashes. In the grooves of the drill bit, I saw a pink mush." I try not to throw up.

Maglia makes a note, then calls two blue-uniformed cops who've been searching the basement. The three huddle, though the red-faced one casts furtive looks at me. Then the photographer comes to snap pictures of the puddle, and the technician, Judy, takes a sample of the blood, whereupon Maglia asks for my robe to turn over to the lab.

It goes through my mind, where's a lawyer? Nasty thought, given my recent experience with the legal profession through my divorce. Did Maglia refer to our talk as an interview? He didn't say interrogation, I'm sure of it. Should he read me my rights? What about the Miranda thing? "You have the right to remain silent." Except that's for drug dealers and car thieves. Miranda is for suspects, not for me. Certainly not for me.

Maglia introduces a sharp-faced brunet, Officer Prish, whereupon Judy, wearing plastic gloves, opens a paper bag. Officer Prish accompanies me to the bedroom, where Judy takes my robe and closes it in the bag.

"I thought you used plastic."

"Plastic degrades the evidence."

"Will I get my robe back?"

"In due course."

As if I'd ever wear it again. But my very own robe—evidence in a murder in my own home. Quickly I put on a sweater and slacks. Back in the front room, Maglia reports that the basement search is finished for now. No signs of disturbance, Ms. Cutter, though we might want to come back. He adds, "I advise you to change your locks."

"I'll do that."

"And, Ms. Cutter, any further thoughts on anything that links Steven Damelin to your aunt, any ties?"

I think of Steven's necktie. And those strips on his wrists.

'You mean their 'deal'?' He nods. Walking to the door, I feel less escorted than released from custody.

"Is there anything I need to do?" I ask.

"Just put yourself in our hands."

Mi casa es su casa?

I know the script. The detective will give me his card. So he does, then adds a twist: the order not to leave the area without first informing the Homicide Division of the Boston police.

Chapter Five

Am I a suspect? Maglia disappears before I can ask. What now? It's after ten, and Steven's body is still upstairs. Uniformed police cluster outside, and my right shoulder aches. What's a woman to do? Get a bucket, cold water, sponge, and Clorox. I pull on my oldest jeans and shirt, stand over the radiator area, and say something close to a prayer, then sink to my knees and start scrubbing the blood from my floor.

Each spongeful of rusty rose brings the slaughter of Steven Damelin home. The sponge and brush pace my sobs and feel oceanic. Tears mix with the water and blood like a ritual bathing. Like a grisly sponge bath.

There is no catharsis. Forget tragedy's platitudes. Steven Damelin is dead, and sponging his blood from my floor feels wrong. It's sacrilegious to empty the pail into a bathroom drain. A votive candle should glow brightly. Instead, the air sharpens with chlorine bleach.

With knees wet, I scrub hard and rhythmically despite the

aches and pains from yesterday. Biscuit stays back, tail down, ears dropped. Then an unanticipated feeling begins, like a warm hand on my shoulder as I work along. The hand squeezes, gently at first, then harder, like a clamp. It's physical, though nothing like the bruises from yesterday's fall.

I push up, kneeling with sponge in hand as I try to blink back a teary blur. The blur thickens, and the clamped feeling yields to double vision as shapes form as if through a lens. Eyes wide open. I'm now in two places. This is my apartment, my floor, but in my mind there's black-brown water and a pale floating log. The watery scene draws me, sweeps me in. Calm at the surface, the currents below are roiling. Whirlpools suck at my arms and legs. A spiral twists at my thighs and torso, and my lungs fill and my head recoils from a hard blow from the log. It's a drowning place, this picture. Somehow I know this and cannot blink it all away.

What is happening here? The blood—it's triggered my sixth sense. As if I'm drugged, the scene claims me. Now a figure, a human form. I make out—Steven. It's Steven Damelin. Though I can't see his features, it's him, far off but near too. He twists in the current, dodges the log. He flails and tries to swim away, but the current is too powerful. He thrashes at the surface but goes down, drowning before my eyes. I cannot help to save him. My lungs—my own lungs are filling as my chest burns. On my knees on the hardwood, I myself am experiencing Steven Damelin in the act of drowning.

Eyes wide open, I drop the sponge and try to wait. Biscuit whines, and the fur on her neck is rising. The dog growls and bares her teeth. Biscuit, girl, no. Crouching low, Biscuit is ready to lunge, attack the very air. Can I stand up? Yes, but I stagger back, half sick. The water and log stay like a photo print

as I cough and swallow and lean against a wall here in my home I hear my own breath.

Panting

Slowly, ever so slowly, the vision fades as I stand against the wall and breathe. For a fact, I do breathe. Normality is edging back, that is, if a murder site counts as normal. Yet my heart pounds. Looking down, I expect to see each hard beat at my chest.

Why this vision? What's it about? Have I relived a particular moment from Steven's past when he came close to drowning? Did I experience a trauma in his life? Some psychics do bear the burden of others' catastrophes, but I don't want to be one of them. If my psychic self channels Steven's life crises, can I block them? Or could I be destined—doomed—to relive events of his life, a man I barely knew?

Or maybe the vision is post-traumatic stress from the murder plus the hit and run. Some psychic messages speak in symbols. The drowning, is it symbolic? Water for blood? Whichever, I'm limp, my scalp actually tender from the log—Steven in water with a tree trunk? It's as vivid as the young man's corpse. There's one practical thing to do. I take a deep breath, pick up the scrub pail, hold it away from my body, then pour the bloody water down my toilet, flush, step out of the bathroom. Another intake of breath, a second flush. And a third.

If only I'd known Steven better.

If only I had not known him at all.

What about my bloody door? Loath to step out and face that brushwork pattern, I force myself to go speak to one of the cops, Sergeant Dorecki, a nervous, pale-faced man who could use a few hours in the sun. He tells me Steven's body will be removed to the ME.

"Is that the morgue?"

"The medical examiner." His lip twitches. "Yes, the morgue. It takes four to six hours for police to work a homicide scene."

"Will the police photographer take photos of this door?"

"Already did, ma'am. Took quite a few."

"The blood marks, don't they look deliberate, like Oriental writing?" But the sergeant won't say. I ask, "Will the police clean the marks from my door when you're all through?"

"Clean the door? No, ma'am."

It dawns on me, the whole upstairs cleanup will be my job when the police are finally finished. Mr. Clean, that's who I need. Mr. Clean in his white muscle shirt and earring. In person.

"You know, ma'am, there's companies that clean up after crime scenes. It's what you'd call a niche market." He rhymes it with "itch." "I'm not allowed to recommend any specific service, but some folks say Right True Clean does fine work. They could do your door too."

Right True Clean. I write it down.

Another task is for right now. Biscuit, it's bath time. In minutes she's in the tub, soothed by the lather, the warm rinse, her Nirvana. My water beagle. I rub her down with my thickest towel, then blow-dry her back, belly, tail. She's delighted, and it's a lovely time-out from everything while we play tug-of-war with the towel. Biscuit makes her faux growl, and I playfully growl back. Danger, allergies have plagued me forever, but frankly I can't imagine life without this dear dog.

In the bathroom, the door closed, I then strip, put all my clothing into a trash bag, step into the tub shower, and stand under the scalding water until it runs cold, not once looking down for fear I'll see the blood from my hair and scalp tinting the water at my feet. Or that I'll reenter that realm of Steven's drowning. I touch the spot where the dog bit my head.

Why is it still sore?

Forget it, Reggie. Stop obsessing. Dry off and put on a nice cable sweater and slacks and slip into Ferragamo flats, a vestige of your former high-end life as Gina Baynes Magna's line comes to mind: "Put yourself in our hands."

The hands I've put myself into—Marty's, the divorce lawyer's, the wretched stockbroker's. They're the gang of three I hold responsible for my financial undoing.

Arms out, I inspect my hands, turning backs to palms. The wedding diamond set, gone. The sapphire ring from Marty's promotion, gone. The red polish, stripped.

The work life of these hands—the diapers, dishes, floors, typing, Marty's daily massages as he climbed the corporate ladder. Later on, the rose bouquets, graceful penmanship, delicate handshakes, tying bows, ladling punch, pouring tea, holding sterling and crystal stemware in manicured fingers at benefits.

Scrubbing Steven Damelin's blood from my floor.

Put yourself in our hands—like the women who believe that court orders will restrain the men who come back and kill them. Suppose my door was marked with blood on purpose. Suppose my apartment is earmarked.

Suppose whoever was driving the blue car was waiting to run me down. An old slogan pops up. *The Life You Save. May Be Your Own.*

I rub my cheek, recalling a saying of Jo's. "You're responsible for what you touch."

I touched that murder scene with my eyes. I scrubbed the bloody floor. Hands-on, that's the life I craved when I moved here to Boston. Close to broke, I'm grateful as hell to live Jo's town house, with its upstairs apartment, which is a major source of my income, along with my little weekly newspaper column "Ticked Off." My laptop keyboard, it's hands-on. But be careful what you wish for—because I touched, and the blood spattered

my floor and left a bitter taste of fear in my mouth. Am I responsible? For what, exactly?

My stomach clenches, fists tighten, toes curl. Something stirs deep inside, like I'm out on a ledge in a cutting wind. It's a sense of risk, of danger. I have things to do.

Lady, start your engine.

Chapter Six

First, call my kids. Jack doesn't answer, but Molly's voice is light and chipper.

I was just leaving for the studio, Mom. How goes it?

Sit down, Molly. I have something to tell you. In my PTA president voice, and sparing her the gruesome specifics, I describe the murder over her gasps and outcries. "The police are professionals, dear, the detectives and officers have everything under control."

Mom. I'm coming up to spend the night with you.

"Absolutely not."

"I'll take a train and come back down to Providence in the morning. You can't stay by yourself alone."

Of course I can. I'm perfectly safe. Platoons of police are camped outside. Right now I need information. Tell me, did Aunt Jo ever talk about a man named Steven Damelin?

"He's the murdered guy?"

"Did she ever talk about a 'deal' with him?"

"Not to me. But, of course, her mind wandered there at the end. I don't remember anybody named Steven. Tell me more about the deal."

"I'm asking you."

She pauses. "Jo never said 'deal,' but last Christmas she said I could have the studio of my dreams when her ship came in. I remember because she didn't say *if*. She said *when*. And you know how she was about grammar."

"What ship?"

"Probably the lottery, what else? But I couldn't imagine her spending money on lottery tickets. Can you? I cannot. So maybe she meant something else. Or maybe she was disoriented. Back to tonight. Mom, I want to come up there and stay with you. I can help."

Actually she could. My daughter the artist could look at the blood marking and tell for certain whether it was deliberately brushed and dabbed onto the door. But she mustn't babysit Mother in a homicide house.

"I can get the next train up."

"Sweetie, no. You have work to do, and I'm doing great."

"Mom, get out of there for a couple days. Go to a hotel."

Hotel? Like Mrs. Martin Baynes in countless hotels on business trips with her executive husband—the carpeted, soundproof suites with fruit baskets and champagne. Looking back, it was suffocation masked as luxury. Can't do, Molly. Too costly in all kinds of ways.

"Put it on a credit card."

"Sorry, dear, that plastic firewall has melted. But the police'll sort the whole thing out. Let's plan on dinner over the weekend. I'll drive down. You can show me the latest art at the Rhode Island School of Design. I promise to be shocked."

"For godsake, Mom." Suddenly her tone's sharp. "For godsake

the man upstairs was murdered. What if you're in danger too? Wake up!"

I'm hyperawake, if she only knew. Though "Wake up!" was my daughter's trumpet call when everybody but me knew about Marty and Celina.

"I am awake, Molly. Trust me, I am fully awake and under complete police protection."

"You mean that detective you work with on the psychic homicide stuff? Delaney?"

"Frank Devaney. Absolutely he's on the case."

"How about psychic vibes about the murder upstairs? Do you feel anything?"

I lie and tell her no vibes so far, but not to worry. "Biscuit's a good watchdog."

"Taffy and Boyo were better." She means our two former family dogs, the golden retriever and the black Lab that drove me crazy with my allergies. This moment isn't strictly about dogs. My daughter wants affirmation of her own childhood. "They were the world's greatest dogs, Mol. But Biscuit's nice too."

"Well, don't you walk around outside. Dad says it's dangerous."

"Your dad hates Boston. He's Middle American to the core."

On that sour note of parental split, we say bye and I notch up the heat and call Gibralter Realty, but the voice mail extension, and ask my agent friend Meg Givens to get back to me with her file of background information on Steven Damelin.

Out front, Dorecki is still guarding my door. Nobody answers any of the three doorbells at the next town house, 25 Barlow.

Autumn chill has settled in as I walk to the end of the block where the blue car shot forward with a squeal. Surely somebody in this neighborhood talked with Steven in the last month. Back inside, a kitchen fridge magnet gives me an idea. "B's

cutt. let's get your lead. We're going for a walk to visit the Tsakis brothers."

"Eez Mees Reggie and Beescutt!" The man who greets us in the grocery store several blocks up Tremont has a classic handlebar mustache, thick black hair, and shining jet black eyes. George Tsakis is spooning dark olives from brine in a store that resembles the mom and pop groceries in small Lake Michigan resort towns where we vacationed in my past life where even canned noodle soup somehow looks personal and local treats are featured at the front counter. Here it's baklava and spanakopita.

So Biscuit takes you for a walk today in cool weather. Come in, get warm. Hey Ari, comes special friends. A flurry of Greek brings out a man who could be a stocker twin except for his shining pink scalp. Ari Tsakis takes a dog treat from an apron pocket. Heres the ritual. Ari says, I give her treat. I nod, and Biscuit leaps to catch the dog cookie in midair. We listen to the chomping, enjoy the dog's pleasure, feel charmed when she lies down in her favorite spot by the onions. This dog knows she's among friends.

So, Mees Reggie, what you like today? A pumpkin?

"Not yet. Maybe closer to Halloween."

'An your aunt — she buys the biggest pumpkin. She makes it smile."

"A jack-o'-lantern?"

And candy corn. She buys all our candy corn to give away to kids. Now is too late, she is gone, our good friend. Ari points to a wall filled with corkboard notices. This is her idea. You know this? Jo tells us par a bulletin board in the store. Everybody comes in. Is good for business. Free gold. Is true. We miss her."

"So do I."

George says, "How about fresh apples today? We keep special Macs in back. The magical back is where luscious treats await every customer. We deliver to Barlow Square. We bring apples to your door today."

The blood-marked door. I fight a chill. "Let me think a few minutes. I want to ask a question. My new upstairs tenant, the young man with dark hair?" They nod. "I told him to shop here. When he moved in, I said he must come to Tsakis Brothers."

"Ah, Steeeven?"

"Yes, Steven Damelin."

"Is good. Cheerful guy. He likes deli roast beef. A good customer."

My throat tightens. If I lose my nerve and fail to tell them, they'll find out from the neighborhood grapevine and be offended by my silence. Besides, I need information.

"George and Art, I have something terrible to tell you. Something that's happened to Steven."

"He sick?" George asks.

"No, not sick. Worse than sick." Their eyes narrow to black pinpricks. Biscuit whines, and I reach for the word. "Homicide."

"Keeled—how he keeled?"

I say this carefully. "Drill."

Art makes his finger and thumb into a gun and goes "brrrr."

"No, not that kind. I mean . . . with a power drill. Hardware."

Their horror and kindness are touching. Art staggers back. The brothers speak in rapid Greek. George pours me a thick black coffee in a tiny cup and pats my shoulder. A customer comes in for bananas and Oreos. Biscuit nestles closer against the onion sack. We all drink coffee in an atmosphere growing heavier by the moment.

Art's brows draw into a deep frown. "Who does this? Is a breaking-in?"

"A break-in? It's not clear." I add, "The police are investigating. Many police at the house."

"Fingerprints?"

"Fingerprints." Plus, no doubt, DNA samples, skin flecks, whatever else. I wish I hadn't kicked the drill, even accidentally.

Ari shakes his head and sips. "So we wait for police to work."

George says, "Such nice guy. Like sunshine. We happy to see him."

The same talk as for Jo. I wait while two teen boys come in for chips, Twinkies, sodas; then I get to the point. "Somebody didn't like Steven. George, Ari, I need to ask a few questions. You saw Steven several times this past month?"

Their faces are a mix of elegy and anguish. "Sometimes every day, yes."

"Did he ever talk about himself?"

"Talk? No special talk. Weather is cool. American chitter chat."

"Was he alone? Did he come by himself?"

The brothers exchange glances. George says, "Sometimes a big kid."

"Luis?"

"Dark like a night."

"You mean his skin?"

"Like a storm."

"Oh, you mean moody? Angry?"

George scowls. "That guy."

"Bad guy," says Ari.

"I think he's fifteen. Big for his age. Do you know his last name? Luis what?"

Ari shrugs, shakes his head, and stirs the olives. "Steven calls him Lueez."

"Does he live nearby?"

They don't know. "He is a dark sky, that kid," George says. "Like a bomb. Like he go *boom*." Ari points to the deli case. "Nothing please him. Order a sub, not enough ham, the bread no good. Steven buys him a lottery ticket. The number almost wins. He blames us, says we give him a bad number."

"Not the one he asked for?"

George nods. Steven feels bad, tries to make him happy, gives him chocolate. He yells, throw ticket on the floor, kick it. Bang the counter. Throw things. Break some glass. The Fourth of July he is like fireworks." George points to the thick glass cold-cuts case. "Bam! We get new glass. Steven pays us."

The brothers exchange glances again as if deciding whether to say more. Ari shakes his head no. They fall silent.

"What's he look like?"

George points to the licorice Twizzlers. "Hair this color."

Ari puffs out his chest. "Face always like this." He squints and scowls. "And big, like on TV. The tire man."

"The Michelin Man?" They nod. "Did Steven seem okay about him? Did he seem scared?"

They shrug and shake their heads. Ari says, "We not have *psukhe*." Their eyes are solemn. Broadly speaking, *psukhē* is Greek for psyche, a word they use for Jo and for me too. They speak it with respect, even awe. The Tsakises mean that they're neither psyches nor psychologists. They know nothing of Steven's thoughts. Ari sips his coffee.

"When he broke the glass, you didn't notify the police?"

If we call, maybe the kid go *boom*' for sure."

George steps close. "Steven," he says. "You think this guy robs Steven? Kills him?"

"I don't know."

"The police finds out." George's gaze is shrewd. "Police guards your house?"

"I . . . I hope so."

Miss Reggie, you get new locks. Nick's Locks. I call for you." George goes to the phone, speaks in a torrent of Greek. He comes to you by five. Okay?" Grateful, I agree.

I buy a box of Milk Bones, pass on the apples but say yes to pears and a chunk of feta. George puts the order on my tab, which is so nice, so different from the mall shopping of my corporate nomad years, the customer service desk and plastic smiles. Biscuit stands up, tail wagging.

As we're leaving, Artemis clings to me. "*Psukhi* is great gift, Miss Reggie. But you must watch out. Who killed Steven, this is for the police, not your job. We are grocers, but Greeks know *Erinyes*. How you say it, furious?"

"The Furies?"

He nods. This Lueez, he is *frenzy*. He is angers. He is torments. Steven too close. You stay away."

Chapter Seven

Easy to say, tough to do. I walk Tremont, steadied by the commerce of cafés and restaurants, bakery, florist, shoe repair. It begins to rain, the cold drops plastering fallen leaves to the sidewalk. Biscuit loves the wet. Somehow this beagle's a water dog. Tires hiss on the wet pavement, and the meter maid does a brisk business. I walk fast. New Englanders do always said, do not whine.

Steven's bloody body, however, flashes like a strobe light. Spiders crawl on the face of every pedestrian. The shop windows feature Halloween ghouls and bats, and every passerby seems a possible murderer. Could it be the gangly guy in black denim? The brush-cut blond with shifty eyes who pulls a little too hard at Biscuit's ears?

The dog trots nicely alongside. Beagles are notoriously friendly. She might lick the hand of the killer, perhaps the muscular redheaded woman with the heavy stride—at which point I realize the murderer is not necessarily male. I see dead bodies on

the second floor of every building. The windowpanes are eyes of death. It's raining hard, and Biscuit splashes in every puddle. It's no place for light Ferragamos. Since my days of high-end shoes are over, should I let these be ruined?

As if it matters.

Suddenly a burly black-haired kid bursts out of the video store. His sneakers smash at the pavement. I think of Luis, and my heart jumps. The kid crosses the street, walking fast, his thighs as thick as tree trunks. He looks older than fifteen, but who can tell for sure? He's in orange sweats. I strain to see his hands, as if they'd be bloody even in the rain.

Stop it, Reggie. Back off. Cool it and calm down. I try, my state of high alert bordering on hallucination.

But gut instinct has its uses. Suppose that Steven ignored his. Suppose that deep down, Steven, the Big Buddy, grew frightened of Luis and tried to dismiss his fears. Maybe he felt trapped between mentoring duty and the guilt of his own terror. Did Steven send me this message as he described Luis? In my own hit-and-run moment, was I deaf? Was I blind to the look of fear deep in his eyes?

"Lady, your pear . . .

"Oh. The soggy bag has got a hole. Thanks you." I take the fallen fruit as Biscuit sniffs an Akita, whose owner clearly thinks her own dog is slumming. A breed snob, but I'm grateful for the distraction.

It's been a two-hour time-out. Biscuit and I reach Barlow Square just in time to see the gurney, the body bag, two uniformed cops straggling down the rain-slick granite steps outside. A small crowd has gathered, a sailor in his pea jacket, a woman in a yellow rain hat, a man with three Scotties that bark at Biscuit, who whines pitifully the whole time, then tries to

lunge. I am separating dogs as Steven is lifted into a patrol wagon.

There are just four cruisers double-parked now.

But three TV vans are out front with crews taping. The crowd seems reluctant to disperse, as if the sideshow might continue, as if they might get themselves on TV. I run a gauntlet up my own stairs, gripping the iron banister so I won't fall.

"Miss, do you live here? Could we just ask you—"

"One question: did you know the deceased—just one question . . . did you—?"

In the vestibule, Sergeant Dorecki peers into the sodden grocery bag as if my own front door is a checkpoint. He tells me I am now free to scrub my door.

Inside, I take off the wet things, towel my head and towel Biscuit. Deep breathing helps for calm. I wash and eat a pear.

There are two phone messages. One's from Gibralter Realty. Meg Givens tells me that Steven Damerin's employer is Corsair Financial in Boston's financial district. I jot the address. The other is Maglia. He requests an interview at precinct headquarters—if at all possible, this afternoon.

I grab the phone. Ed Maglia's phone voice is brusque, and I murmur *lawyer*, though he assures me that won't be necessary. The former Mrs. Martin Baynes, I realize, would go flanked by a bevy of lawyers. Reggie Cutter goes it alone. One way or another, I'll speak for myself.

Chapter Eight

The precinct house on Harrison Avenue looks like a modern corporate fortress. A parking space opens up a few doors down the block and I take it, grabbing my umbrella and hurrying inside, where it's all computer screens and blue uniforms. I've changed into caramel slacks and a jacket with a white blouse, light on the jewelry.

Magda shakes hands. He's thinner than I thought this morning, his skin sallow in fluorescent light. We pass a droopy Stars and Stripes, and he points me to a small room with a cushioned chair, a venetian blind, a table topped with chipped Formica and Detective Francis Devaney. Yes, straddling a wood chair in one corner sits Frank Devaney.

"Hello, Reggie."

"Hello, Frank."

Wonderful and awful. It's the feeling. Seduced and abandoned. Here's the homicide detective whose tough stalled cases I've helped solve, the guy whom my psychic aunt worked with,

for years and was close to. This is the guy I phoned when Steven's bloody body turned me inside out.

The guy who failed to call me back.

Devaney runs a hand through short salt-and-pepper hair and I notice a puffiness around his gray eyes. His hair and crooked nose have become so familiar over the past months. He wears brown slacks and a light tweed jacket straining at the button across a barrel chest. Today's tie, as usual, is the dregs, a rainbow that looks like an oil slick. Is his presence here in the precinct room more treacherous than comforting, or the other way around?

Sit down, Reggie, he says. How about some coffee? I accept, and Devaney goes for mugs, sugar packets, a shaker of powdered creamer under his armpit. "Black as usual?" I nod. He puts a mug on the table in front of me.

I take a tiny sip, and my first sentence is an opening bid. I'm sorry I accidentally kicked the drill."

They both stare.

"I should have been more careful, but I was in shock. I hope I haven't caused problems."

Both heads tilt as if listening to an exotic birdcall. Maglia says, "This isn't about the drill, Ms. Cutter. In fact, this is not about the crime scene as such."

"Oh?"

Devaney dumps whitener into his coffee, looks in vain for a stir stick, and jiggles the mug.

"What can I do for you?"

Maglia sits forward, and I'm braced for more of his sarcasm. Yet his expression is somehow different this afternoon, perhaps softer. "Ms. Cutter, we appreciate you coming down here. We would like to ask your help. As the owner of Steven Damelin's apartment, you're in a position to assist with our investigation.

At last clarity They've talked, these two, and I'm about to be invited into the case as the psychic They've come to their senses My ability is needed, and they know it Let them approach you, Reggie. Let the recruitment begin.

You told us you first met Damelin yesterday when you fell in the street and he helped you."

When a car almost ran me down in a hit-and-run assault If I say this aloud, however, I'll sound self-serving and confrontational

"Yesterday around two."

Tipping his chair back, the tactic of a shorter man exerting authority, Magria says, "Ms Cutter, an investigation goes forward on several fronts Some are technical, some not It's not always neat and clear-cut like on TV."

I could reply that I know this from working homicide cases with Frank Devaney who thus far seems more interested in his coffee than the specifics of the moment.

We're already making progress, but you might be able to help."

Whatever I can do Here it comes the request for a psychic's help This is no time to be coy, I'd say yes at once and get to work I'll tell about Steven's drowning scene the vision of the water and the log.

"Here's the favor you can do for us, Ms Cutter and it shouldn't take much of your time You can let us know about anybody who comes around looking for Steven Damelin Anybody calls for him, anybody knocks at his door, we'd like to know Another thing, you could keep an eye on the mail Just have a look at whatever comes to the apartment addressed to Steven Damelin and let us know."

The mail Monitor the mail? My voice cracks in surprise Have I heard him right? Devaney, who has said nothing spreads

his palms on the table and studies the Formica. I'm asked to be a household snoop and mail clerk? Is this it?

"It would help us to know of any contacts . . . particular return addresses. So we can cast a wide net."

Stunned, I manage for the sake of pride to ask, "Is the postmaster general in on the investigation?"

Maglia's smile is condescending, so very Marty. "The postmaster general's office gets involved when there's reason to believe a crime violates postal regulations. We have no reason to think that's the case here. Isn't that right, Frank?" Devaney looks up and nods. "But that's a good point, Ms. Cutter. That's good thinking."

Maglia doesn't mean good thinking. He means dumb. I remember my son's junior deputy phase, his little badge. Do I get one to pin on my collar? How could Frank Devaney go along with this? As a senior detective, he outranks Maglia. How could he?

Yet their request for help tells me that so far, early as it is, the police have no notion who Steven Damelin's killer might be.

What to do? Walk out in a huff? Tell them to call when they have a better offer? Say I'm a psychic and don't do windows? It's tempting. But if I give in to injured pride, they'll cut me out of the case altogether. The new Boston life that I love will end in a heartbeat. These past months of homicide cases working with Devaney, they're everything to me. Even though I'm unofficial, a volunteer, the cases are my life's adventure.

And now, suddenly, my life blood? Steven's dead body is burned into my brain . . . and my door marked, patterned in blood, actual blood. Life blood and death blood. Did that blue car start all this? My daughter's right. I could be a marked woman.

Frank Devaney won't meet my gaze. He reaches in his pocket for a roll of Tums and crunches a tablet. Maglia drums his man

cured nails. I'll play the hand they've dealt me." "Well, gentlemen, I already have a pastoral fact for you. The boy whom Steven Damelin was mentoring. Luis?"

Maglia nods while Devaney's brow angles up.

"I talked to two grocers who describe Luis as disruptive and temperamental, actually violent. He vandalized their store, and Damelin paid them for the damage. They did not contact the police, so no official record exists." I then spell "Tsakis Brothers" and give the address, knowing George and Art will not be pleased, but will forgive. Maglia's expression of approval tells me I've got my start as mail clerk and concierge.

Ladylike and cool, I say, "Detective Maglia Frank, I'm having my locks changed, but I'm worried about security. Can you tell me how much police protection I'll get?"

"Ms. Cutter, we'll have stepped up patrols on your block, day and night, long enough to ensure safety in your neighborhood."

Meaning, best guess, only a few days. Then I'm totally on my own. It's not their personal problem. Nobody marked their doors in blood. Nobody tried to run them down.

"Can you tell me when the Homicide Division might know more about my front door? When will you know whether the blood marks are accidental or deliberate? And whether the blood is in fact Steven Damelin's?"

Devaney leans forward and coughs. His buckle scrapes the edge of the tabletop, then slides out to the loosest hole. Maglia clears his throat and looks sheepish. "Things, Ms. Cutter, an investigation takes time. Many different leads must be followed. And people aren't always what they seem to be. For instance, you described your tenant as a clean-cut young man who gave you first aid when you fell."

Yes.

"We already have information that suggests a very different profile."

Maddening. they don't tell me what it is

Maglia actually smiles He has a chipped front tooth So we're just asking you to look at the mail and take note of anybody that might come around asking about the deceased

"Just anybody?" I ask Or would certain people fit the profile better? Maybe if you could be more specific? I bat my eyes for the naive, expectant effect Neither one bites The profile is their secret.

Ms Cutter, if you just keep an eye out, we'll take it from there "

"Let me ask another question What about Steven's belongings?"

I'll tell you something Ms Cutter We've learned that Steven Damelin was estranged from his family

"How about his furniture?"

Maglia shrugs They push back to signal the close of the interview We all stand Frank Devaney says, Consider it yours to dispose of Maglia thanks me for serving as eyes and ears

Chapter Nine

Eyes and ears?" I'm at the curb by my Beetle with my car key out and Frank Devaney right behind. He followed me out of the Harrison Avenue precinct house and we walked in silence. "Eyes and ears, Frank?"

"Reggie—"

Or is it bait and switch? That's what it feels like.

"I know you're upset—"

"Upset? A man was murdered on the floor above me in the middle of the night. My front door is marked in blood. Upset? Try 'terrified.'"

"Believe me, we care about your protection. And we want your help. But Maglia got the case when you called nine-one-one, Reggie. We have rules and procedures." He pops another Tums. "It's Ed Maglia's case, not mine."

Car door open, I toss in the umbrella. Ownership of the murder is that it? We don't own my tenant murdered. My door marked in

blood. Do you think Jo Cutter would bow out and watch by the window in her rocker?"

His answer is slow and deliberate. "We called Jo when we were blocked. Usually when a case got cold."

"And she . . . warmed it up?"

"You know what I mean."

"So I'm on hold until Homicide gets stuck?"

He leans a shoulder against my car. "Reggie, listen to me. There's two points. One, Ed Maglia doesn't go in for psychics. The idea weirds him out. Ninety-nine out of a hundred cops feel the same way. You must've heard this from your aunt. She was low-key. It made it possible to work together. We worked quietly, mostly on the side."

Partners below the radar. Is this his hint, a side deal between the two of us . . . a sign of life for my psychic self? "What's the second point?"

"That you're too close to this case. It's because it is your house and tenant."

"So I'm out because I'm in?"

"An investigation needs a certain detachment."

"Let me try."

"I worry about you."

"I take care of myself."

"You go out on your own. I could list the times."

"For important information, such as Luis."

"A neighborhood contact, that's fine. I'm talking about the other times you got yourself in trouble, Reggie. What about when you came so damn close to . . ." He folds his arms, rolls back against my car. "Look, I promised Jo if we worked together, I'd look out for you. That's a promise I try to keep. You've got kids."

"*You've* got kids. And your wife."

I got a badge too. It says this is my job. My risks come with the job. Over twenty years on the force, experience counts. It's my work, not a thrill ride. No, let me finish. His voice drops low. "One way to help you is working with Ed on this case. I signed on to lend a hand. For now I'm advising you to walk your dog, take in a movie, get back to normal." He sees my look. "Yes, normal. Like the evening class I'm taking. Tonight it's pan searing and stir fry. It's good. I put on an apron, and it's another world. As for this case, Reggie, you sit tight."

Sit? Sitting is the posture approved by every man I've ever known.

Anything out of the ordinary, give us the word. Any sixth-sense messages, let me know."

He leans close, but I'm in a bind. Telling him now about my vision of Steven Damelin drowning will 'prove' that I'm too close to the case. If I tell him now, Devaney will forbid me any part in the investigation. For now, my leeway — my freedom — requires a self-imposed gag order. I'll be in touch. Frank. I'll call you. Maybe you'll call me back?"

"Definite maybe." He twinkles. I don't twinkle back.

Devaney is still standing by my VW when I get in, start the engine, rev it to 3,000, 4,000 rpm, feel the surge, and like it a lot.

Chapter Ten

The notion of going upstairs to Steven's makes my skin crawl. I take Biscuit out and count the cops. It's down to one cruiser at the corner, and the sidewalk ghouls are gone, doubtless heartbroken not to see a parade of bagged corpses. Sergeant Dorcest tells me the police are finished. It's after four. The upstairs apartment can be cleaned now.

There's no sign of Nick the locksmith.

I schedule Right True Clean and touch that spot on my head. It's still sore. Press harder. It's definitely sore.

Keep busy, Reggie. I call my son's voice mail in Silicon Valley. It's Mom again, Jack. Please call ASAP. Stepping outside, I try all the doorbells next door at 25 Barlow. Nobody answers. I go back inside. The mail arrives, shoved through the vest pocket slot. For me, there's a magazine renewal, supermarket specials, autumn closeouts. Actually, I'm hoping for a card, especially one postmarked Cairo or Damascus. A certain man promises to be in touch but travels a good deal. I already have cards showing the

pyramids and Sphinx and camels. Each message promises dinner as soon as he lands in Boston. Meanwhile, the cards are stowed in my lingerie drawer—so far, four of them. There's no fifth arrival today.

Addressed to Steven are a bill, a menswear sale, discounts on rugs. I set it all aside. Will Magda trust me with a forwarding address? What address? Who is the next of kin?

I go into the study with Jo's massive rolltop desk and two oak file cabinets. This was her "boiler room," where I turn out "Ticked Off" weekly on my laptop. Jo's files are still intact for sentimental reasons mixed with inertia. We all joked about her first generation laptop, but Jo Cutter believed in paper. In the past months, I've gone through her old grade books, high school history curriculum plans, and community organizing records. Now I search again, among the hundreds of names in the files, for Steven Damerin. A stickler for record keeping, Jo surely opened a file on their "deal."

There's no such file, not in these oak drawers. A thorough search yields no trace of Steven. There is a thank-you letter acknowledging Jo's help launching the Big Buddies program, signed by a Rev. Gail Welch of All Souls Church. I'm noting her name when Nick the locksmith arrives, a mustached man as thin as a rail.

At the sight of my vest pocket door, he puts down his toolbox and his eyes widen to dark saucers. His Adam's apple jerks. Is Chinese? I force myself to look at the door panel, and my throat closes when he says, "This dry blood?"

No, it's paint. Just paint. Come in. He looks ready to flee. Please come in. I force a smile, and at last he picks up his tools and crosses my threshold. I walk him through every room and order a combo of dead bolts, chains, and padlocks. In minutes, his drill whines and screams.

There's one final task in the study. The sight of my door and Nick's reaction stiffen my resolve. I close the study door tight and unlock a walnut cabinet where two handguns are kept. Yes, guns. These, too, were Jo's. Why she had them I never knew. They remain one of her secrets, shocking when I first came upon them last winter. In Jo's life, they're inexplicable. The Colt .44 looks like something from a Clint Eastwood movie. The other, the Taurus .38 revolver, is another matter. It's scary, yet reassuring too. Am I a gun enthusiast? Hardly. Have I ventured to use this firearm? Once. I brandished but did not fire it. Devaney would have a fit if he knew.

Reaching into the cabinet drawer, the hiding place, I close my hand around the grip of the Taurus. The safety is on, and the gun not loaded, though I own a box of half jacket flat point bullets. Over the last couple of months, I've toyed with the notion of gun lessons. It has seemed adventurous, like kayaking or scuba.

Now it's life support. When Nick leaves, I will load the .38 and check the Web and yellow pages for firearms instruction.

The locksmith's tools clink in the background, and I'm thankful for the ringing phone.

"What's this about murder, Mom?"

"Jack . . . you talked to your sister."

"She e-mailed me. The e-generation. So you actually talked to the guy, and then he got killed? Are you okay? Are the police still there?"

In droves. I lie. "Your Aunt Jo's house is a police convention."

I picture my Silicon Valley son at his computer and with a three-day stubble, his sandy hair tousled, probably in shorts and sandals, living the life he loves, not a suit in his closet. Then his male fix-it logic kicks in, so very *Jack*. "You gotta think twenty-four/seven, Mom. You need security."

"Dear, the locksmith is here right now."

"Molly and I think private security."

This sounds suspiciously like round-the-clock nurses, casting me as the invalid. Which I totally reject. They mean well, but grown children will be patronizing. They can't help it. I'll look into an alarm system, Jack."

I mean private guards. No metro force will give you round-the-clock surveillance. When things quiet down, they're gone. They were too late for that poor sob who needed protection, and the police aren't interested in you."

He wasn't a sob, Jack. He was a helpful young man. As it happens, I'm working with the police."

"You're an amateur, Mom."

Try apprentice, Jacko. And remember the warmhearted Greek brothers at the neighborhood grocery? They arranged for the locksmith."

"They probably get a kickback."

Oh, Jack, don't be like your father. I mean, they are concerned for my safety."

So am I. But the Greeks aren't standing guard at your doorstep. You need extra protection." Classic Jack. From boyhood, his solutions are blunt. Just remember Houston, Mom.

Oh, hon. My son never quite got over his fifth-grade year, when our house burglary went unsolved and Jack was stunned to learn that the Houston cops couldn't recover the very TV on which he watched police heroes. Not to worry, dear. The detectives are brilliant, and the locksmith's turning the place into Fort Cutter. But let me ask you a few questions. Did Jo ever say anything about a younger man named Steve or Steven Damelin? Think hard."

In the background, I hear a keyboard tapping on. Then my son says a firm no.

"Anything about a 'deal'?"

"Aunt Jo? Hardly."

"Did you notice anything unusual the last few times you spoke to her when she was still . . herself?"

Before the heavy drugs? I don't think . . . wait, maybe one thing. Last fall she offered me travel money if I wanted to see the world."

"A vacation?"

Travel for fun? Think again, Mom. No, it was for education, to broaden my mind. She'd be my sponsor. She said her ship was coming in."

"What ship? When?"

"She didn't say."

I'm careful not to alarm my son. Interesting, Jack. Now I better let you get back to work. Still data mining?

"Data mining it is, Mom."

Gainful employment, that's what it is to me. And my son's happiness. "Keep in touch, Jacko."

Count on it, Mom. Call me. I'm ready to hang up, but he presses the point. No, I mean, call me. It sounds like maybe Jo was connected to the murdered guy in some special way. Don't blow me off, Mom. Because you know what? If Aunt Jo hadn't died, maybe she'd be in danger now. I mean, maybe there's danger in the situation, like the house. Maybe it's some deal that involved Jo and the guy. What's his name again?

"Steven."

Yeah, Steven. Suppose it's something you don't know about, but it's coming down to you. Suppose, like, you're next.

"Jack!"

You have to take care of yourself. You better get serious.

"I'm very serious, Jack."

When we finally hang up, I go to the windows. Evening is

coming on, and there's not one cop car in sight. Gaslights glow algae green along the street, and I think of Steven's body in the morgue, cooled by refrigeration. I hear Nick testing the new locks on every door, ready to bolt me in.

It's a practical move, a sensible precaution. I'll be safer, at least in theory. But locks have their limits. Nick, the cops, my kids—they see protection. Fine.

But right now it's breaking *out* that's on my mind. Yes, I've broken free in life and a free-range woman refuses to be locked in. Call this my autumn resolution. I, Reggie Cutter, hereby refuse house arrest on Barlow Square. I'll bolt, all right. I'll be my own free agent. Scared? Sure, I'm no fool. But like pros who play through the pain, I'll push through to the playing field. More. I'll wrap my arms around this murder case and not let go for a minute till the killer is caught.

Chapter Eleven

Never have I been so thankful for a dog. Biscuit curls at the foot of the bed. She wakes when I do, and when I get out of bed to have a look around, she patrols the rooms at my side. Sniffles and congestion from my canine allergy are the smallest price for this canine companion and watchdog. Restful sleep? Save it for the Sealy ads. The .38 revolver is now loaded, and I've stored it in a shoe box on the shelf in my bedroom closet.

Waking up twice after midnight, I check the new front door and basement locks and peer out the windows. No ones on Barlow Square. Patrol cars circulate up into the wee hours. They move slowly, their flashers off. One cruiser parks at the corner and stays for over two hours. I am thankful.

At six I am up and dressed, the coffee and TV on. The early a.m. news reports a spectacular, made-for-TV warehouse fire in Somerville. Mere seconds are spared for wrap-up coverage of Stevens's murder. Close-ups show the body bag brought down the

stairs, plus my shoulder and Biscuit's nose. Steven's name does not appear in today's *Globe* obituaries.

Three hours from now, Right True Clean will arrive. The apartment will look as good as new. The door panel blood will be gone.

Pouring coffee, I'm suddenly thunderstruck by this: the cleaning will erase all evidence of the Oriental markings. If I need to see the police photographs for any reason, I'll have to plead with Devaney and beg Magda. They'll pull rank and stonewall. No way.

The next couple of hours are suddenly precious. My snapshot film camera has three shots left. *Snap snap snap.* I finish the roll. But suppose they don't turn out. Can I copy the pattern? Draw it, me? It's a standing joke between me and Molly. But tissue paper, tracing paper. God help me, I must trace the markings, with the heel of my hand resting just one tissue thickness from Steven's blood.

Queasiness, I tell myself, is out of the question. The tissue I've saved for gift wrap is now forensic. Quickly I tape a big piece over the door panel and go for a Sharpie pen and—

And hear a horrific roar outside. Yet a familiar roar. What day is it? Good God, it's Wednesday. Yes, Wednesday. The roar and day match. I know whose noise this is, and why it's here.

Why he's here.

Biscuit is a ball of motion, flying to the front, poised to leap into the arms of the biker who's just off his cherry-red Harley Fat Boy and climbing my front steps as if he owns them. He's in black boots, faced tight Levi's, and a Marine Corps jacket. His arms reach out, and the dog flings her whole self at him from muzzle to tail the instant the door opens. Then it's all paws and grunts and growls and barking, while I stand by like a sidelined referee.

"Don't hurt her ears."

"She loves it."

Indeed she does. Roughhousing with this man is Biscuit's utopia. This is R. K. Stark, the custodial "papa" who shares joint ownership of the beagle. Whatever Jo was thinking when she willed her dog to two human polar opposites, neither Stark nor I will ever know. Oil and water we are, or night and day. We see eye-to-eye on almost nothing, not even the dog. Stark rolls Biscuit on the stoop, and her patch of snowy white fur darkens to gray. "Stark, don't, I just bathed her."

"Grits good for her coat. Don't worry, Cutter. I'll take her swimming. The water's warm enough."

Take her. That's the dreadful fact—that Stark has come for Biscuit. We trade off every few days, and it's his turn. He's brought that homemade leather contraption to harness her to the Harley Fat Boy motorcycle. He's here to take my watchdog away.

"How about some coffee?" he asks. He sees my hesitation and misunderstands it. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna nag about your biker course."

He means the motorcycle riding course he's pressing me to sign up for, which is now out of the question. "Stark, a motorcycle is the last thing on my mind."

"Your tuition checks cashed, Cutter. You're on the student list for the last week of the month."

"I don't think so. I have . . . other plans."

"You'll love it. How 'bout the coffee? A quick cup. Don't worry, I'm not moving back in."

This refers to the two years when Stark lived downstairs in Jo's basement rent-free. "A coffee break," I say. "Sure."

But he stops at the sight of the tissue paper over the door panel. "What's this, arts and crafts?"

Biscuit sniffs, whines, writhes, whimpers, and gives a moan-

ing back at the blood-marked door. "Biscuit, no." I take her in my arms. Stark looks hard at the tissue paper. "What's that underneath, Chinese?"

The word "blood" is beyond me. The murder… to talk about it again? I can't. "I'm updating the entryway, trying out a possibility." Stark's gaze narrows, but silently he follows me to the kitchen, where I find an enormous Bruins mug and wait until he spoons in his usual five sugars, stirs, gulps as if the hot brew is a cold soda.

"How can you drink it that hot?"

A leatherneck's a leatherneck inside and out. He means his Marine Corps days. At nearly six feet, Stark is totally fit. His hair is ginger, his eyes Atlantic gray. In his mid thirties, his trademark aroma's unfiltered Camels. I imagine him a few years ago coping with civilian life, living in Jo's basement, camping on a cot with a shower rigged at her ancient soapstone sinks. Supposedly his two years downstairs were to be spent renovating the basement into an apartment while he pulled his life together, but believe me, there's no sign of renovation. Stark says he's forever grateful to Jo and now pays her back by looking out for my welfare. He's a self-appointed adviser and guardian of sorts, meaning Stark repays my aunt's generosity by offering me his personal protective services. Indeed the man has a knack for appearing at the wrong times… and the right times too. The term "jackboot thug" comes close to an apt description, but more than once Stark's been my Boston lifeline.

"So what's up, Cutter? Your eyes look like you need some rack time. You losing sleep?"

As usual, there's no small talk. Stark's nickname could be Mr. Nine Inch Nail. I avoid his question. "A cleaning service is coming."

"I thought scrubbing was part of your workout."

'I'm splurging. Anyway, my column is soon due."

"'Pissed Off.'"

"'Ticked Off.' As you know."

"What's it gonna be? Gentlemen that don't hold doors for ladies? Guests that don't bring vintage wine for supper?"

"For dinner. Don't bait me. But I'm always looking for good ideas."

"In fact, I have one. It's tips."

"Gratuities? I did that column."

"Not big-bucks dining, Cutter. Not your country clubs."

"I included hair salons and valet parking."

He grins as if I'm clueless. I'm talking about the guy at the McCounter, the woman at the drive-thru or Wal Mart. A buck for people working two, three jobs and they can't make it.

"Tips for fast-food workers? For kids?"

"They're not just kids. They're rock bottom, decent working stiffs. They're screwed by big companies and the stock option crowd. They're pushed to the wall."

"Stark, I am not a political columnist. I need rapport with my readers."

"Rapport? What good's rapport when the bottom falls out? I'm talking about people that need help."

"Stark, let's discuss this another time. Right now I could use some help. Actually I'd like a favor. How about let Biscuit stay a few days longer here with me?"

"The life of a lapdog? No way, Cutter. She's in training. I put together a swim-dive program, and we gotta talk about her diet. She needs a protein regimen. . . wait, this isn't strictly about the dog, is it? Something's going on. You got new locks, I saw chisel marks on the front door. Don't give me bull about upgrades in the hall. You look scared. What's up?"

My throat shuts. I force a swallow and say murder and sketch

the last two days from the blue car to the police. He doesn't move a muscle. His eyes narrow to gray oceanic slits. "So the cleaners are coming for the upstairs, right? What about your front door? Let's look."

I drag myself with him. Biscuit nangs back as we lift the tissue. Stark lets out a piercing whistle. "Son of a bitch."

"It's deliberate, isn't it? Oriental? I took some pictures."

"Looks Chinese, maybe more than one character. What's it say?" Neither of us can guess. "You gotta find a translator fast, Cutter. Another thing, what kind of car ran you down?"

Steven said it was a BMW, but I thought Japanese. We look at the door as it dries. As a conspires against me. "Before Jo died, Stark, did she say anything about a deal with Steven? Anything at all?" He says no. "Did she mention his name? Or anything about any younger man in her life? Steven worked at a business called Corsair Financial. There's nothing in her files. I've been through them twice. Did she ever mention that name?" Again, no. "Did she talk about her ship coming in?"

"What ship?"

I don't know. A couple of people heard her talk about *her* ship. We agree it doesn't sound like Jo. I check the time. "The cleaner is due, Stark, and I have to trace the door mark. About Biscuit—"

"She stays here. You need her."

And I'm thinking about a gun course. The timing's wrong for motorcycle lessons. "Anyway, I'm bruised and banged up from that fall in the street."

"Show me." I thrust my purpled elbow. He laughs. "Not even a decent case of road rash."

"What's road rash?"

He laughs and tells me that I'll find out. About the gun course. "Cutter, you need to be clear headed."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning this isn't prime time for you and your .38. Or the John Wayne .44 either."

It's a moment when I wish Stark didn't know about the guns. He found out one midnight last summer. It couldn't be helped.

He pulls out the Harley ignition key. "I'm heading out for now. If you hear Fatso in the middle of the night, take it as a lullaby. If you hear Fatso roar, Cutter, turn over and sleep well.

Chapter Twelve

Sleep? It's unimaginable. I complete the ghastly tracing of the blood mark, fold the tissue with utmost care, and slide it into my bureau drawer with my bras. The rasping noise it's from my trembling fingers.

The door knocker sounds. Right. True Ocean. Half an hour late. It's two guys in jumpsuits with equipment. Quickly I show them the door and lead them upstairs and into Steven's apartment, my breath short and heart pounding as we step in. The playful furniture, the bright colors made for fun—all are shoved and upended as if the police search was a rampage. The cleaners lift a round oak boomerang table upright, and I put the Lava lamp on top.

Somehow the primitive domestic order helps. The imprint of the search is clear—the drawers pulled out, contents rifled, the papers, envelopes, shirts, socks, kitchen implements, two computers, both hard drives ripped and taken as evidence. The blood-soaked rug. The bloodstained floor.

There's no sign of the drill, which doubtless is also secured in an evidence bag. The nail holes look like pores.

Worst of all, however, the smell, like spoiling meat. I rush to a window and stop myself from apologizing—typical female reflex.

"Ma'am," says the thickset one, "we'll take it from here." He's pulling a Mylar bunny suit and respirator mask from a duffel as I go back downstairs, then spend half an hour coaxing the water-soaked Ferragamos back to life for sheer distraction. Wrecking a pair of good shoes isn't exactly like exposing a Steinway grand to the elements, but the mindless soap circles are soothing. The rain stains recede. The shoes look damaged and rescued both.

I stuff them with paper wads and go next door to ring the bell of unit 2 at 25 Barlow Square, a town house nearly identical to my own. The upstairs flat marked "Ptaeitz" is directly adjacent to my own rental flat, meaning Steven's. Three rings and here comes Trudy Ptaeitz in slippers and a pink belted chenille robe with "Mary Kay" over the pocket and a parakeet on her shoulder. She rakes a hand through dark blond hair. Her pug nose is sprinkled with pale freckles, her eyes red rimmed today. I'd guess she's nearing forty, and I hope against hope she can help me.

"Trudy, I'm really sorry to wake you up."

"S'okay, Reggie. Kingpin was chirping so loud I had to get up and cover his cage. Damn bird. Anyway, we night shift workers take our chances on decent sleep. And I meant to call you. My God, a murder on Barlow Square."

Did you see the police next door, the squad cars, yellow tape? I rang your bell a couple times yesterday.

I haven't been home for two days. The hospital's so short-handed I worked double shifts, plus restocking my vending machines. I'm losing sales because people buy bags of Halloween

candy at the supermarket and skip the machines. Oh God, a man is murdered, and I'm worried about candy bars. Me, a nurse."

"So you weren't home the night of the murder."

"No." She shivers and pulls her robe tight. "Thank God the hospital needed me. The post-op floor, it's almost home sweet-home. A lab technician saw TV news and told me. It hit me: one brick firewall away from my apartment, a guy was murdered. You must be a wreck. Want a few Valium?"

I shake my head no. "But could I ask you a couple of questions? I went around to the alley. It looked okay, but I want to make sure. Would you walk back there with me, just to check?"

"No time like the present." She sees me scan her outfit. "Listen, Reggie, I sold Mary Kay and Tupperware to half of Barlow Square. A woman in a pink robe with a parakeet with orange feathers on one shoulder. I'm local color. Let's go."

So we stand in the alley behind 25 and 27, looking for signs of disturbance while gazing upward at Boston's idea of fire safety. It's a setup from another era. An iron balcony crosses from my upstairs rental flat to Trudy's. Should fire break out in either unit and the inside stairwell be blocked, the occupant is supposed to exit a back window onto his or her balcony, then calmly walk across it and knock on the neighbor's window. Ideally the neighbor opens this window and welcomes the fire victim inside. If nobody's home, the escapee is entitled to smash the neighbor's window and climb in. It's a friendly pyrotechnic break-in of sorts. As a deterrent to criminals, there's no ladder down to the ground.

We stand in silence. Trudy says, "Everything looks normal."

I agree. "That's a big drop to the ground. Trudy, did you ever try an actual fire drill on your balcony?"

"Not once in my twelve years here on the square. Who would?"

My dentist tenant almost backed out of the lease when he saw this."

Dr. Tooth, that pain in the neck? Where is he, Bora Bora?"

Africa. He's testing dental pain medicine for a pharmaceutical company."

"Ah, Big Pharma's dirty little game." She sees the question mark on my face. "It's drug trials on human guinea pigs in the so-called developing world. Innocent subjects sign up, all dark-skinned. Informed consent, forget it. It's probably a really dangerous drug. Your dentist will probably make a ton of money. What's his name—Forest?"

"H. Forest Buxbaum, D.M.D. My high-maintenance tenant."

And if he hadn't gone fortune hunting for six months, there'd be no sublet . . . no murder."

No blood mark on my door? Or could my son be right, that Jo's town house is somehow a targeted address?

Believe me," says Trudy, "I thought twice before buying on the second floor. Plus, hauling my merchandise—lotions by the case. And I never got the Mary Kay pink Cadillac. If I'd sold more Spot Solution or Lumineyes—those are the high-end items. Anyway, it looks the same as always back here—no signs of breaking in. So the killer came through the front door?"

"Most likely."

"Right past your own door?"

I shiver, fold my arms, and nod in silence. We walk around to the front of the square, the parakeet riding her shoulder. "Trudy, how well did you know my aunt?"

She sighs. "With my schedule, I hardly socialize, so mostly it was about who's bringing potato salad or slaw for the square's block parties. Your aunt organized them. She always made a vat of her incredible chowder, better than Legal Seafoods. I told her

'Ms. Cutter, this is marketable.' She just laughed. 'We were, you know, just good neighbors.'

"You didn't know Steven Damelin?"

The victim's. Know is a stretch. I saw him at the curb when I got home from work a couple times in the last month. That time of the morning, there's nobody out on Barrow Square. We said hi. He was waiting with a suitcase and a garment bag over his shoulder. The cabs came. Off he went."

"Any particular cab company?"

'In Boston? Among the million? Very hard to break into the cab business, tons of red tape. I looked into it. And I threw it project fizzled. For now, it's Hershey and PayDays.'

Trudy. I pause to get her attention. 'Two days ago a small blue car nearly ran me down out front here at about two o'clock in the afternoon. I was crossing the street, and it sped at me. Do you know anyone with a little blue car?' It clipped my calf.

People on phones worse than drunk drivers. I don't mean to sound flip, Reggie. It's just so awful that you can't take it in. I see everything in the hospital. I'm supposed to be shockproof. Another stupid myth.' She stares at Steven's window, shudders, and tells me to take care of myself as Kingpin says. 'Pretty bird, kiddo, pretty bird deluxe.'

It's almost 5:00 p.m. Back in my kitchen, I grab a quick sandwich. Somebody knocks, and I jump like a scared rabbit. It's Right True Clean all done including my door. Mercifully neither man comments on the blood marks. 'You want to let the upholstery and rugs dry out for about twenty-four hours. We put wood fill in the holes in the floor. It matches pretty good. We found this behind the fireplace mantel.'

He holds up an envelope. 'We think it slipped back there. The police probably worked that area, so I don't know what you want to do.'

I stare at the white envelope as if expecting blood to seep through in front of my eyes, a time-release hemorrhage. No, it's snow white. I'll see the police get it. Just put it on the table. I write the check. Huge. Worth every penny. Right. Trac Clean loads up and departs.

The envelope isn't sealed, and so I peek at the single letterhead sheet from Corsair Financial, Steven's employer. It's just a piece of paper with handwritten numbers and abbreviations in pencil. Holding it, I begin to feel dizzy. It's that screen thing, the water and log. The swirling currents. Steven—

Drop it. Drop the paper. I let it go. It falls to the floor, and I jump back and stand clear as if a whorl will suck me under. Please, God, give my balance back. I wait. Tight throat, tight chest, stinging eyes. The drowning scene, I'm there again. And crying, my cheeks wet with salty fat tears.

But I don't weep for Steven now. These tears are shed for me, for the vertigo and the visions that overtake and drive me to find out who killed him.

Chapter Thirteen

Where did Steven go in the cabs? A month's early morning fares from Barlow Square — maybe the cops can trace his whereabouts through the labyrinth of taxi companies — not me.

I take Biscuit for a short walk to drop off my roll of film at One Hour Foto, then phone Harvard's Department of East Asian Languages and Civilization. The receptionist coolly informs me that professors are busy with the new semester, but she will take my number and my request for a consultation in case any interested faculty or graduate students care to call me. Ditto the departments of Asian studies at Boston University, Boston College, MIT, Tufts, Northeastern and Wellesley. None are really helpful. May they all nibble dim sum and sip tea at the Great Wall.

What now? An hour's work on my column. As ever, the deadline approaches, in the newspaper meaning of the word "dead." Stark's notion of ripping everybody in sight — I'm dubious.

Aren't employers responsible to pay decent wages? Won't workers get overly dependent on dollars at the drive-thru window?

Yet jobs aren't what they were. A few of Molly's friends are temping. One of Jack's pals, a programmer, is clerking at Home Depot after several layoffs. Maybe Stark has a point. I'm drafting "Tip Jar Tactics" when the mail arrives, a reminder of my police errand. Imagine Maglia slipping me a dollar for every report on Steven's mail. Reggie the McMail clerk.

Sorting through, I make two piles. For me: a subscription renewal reminder and specials on cosmetics with a free tote bag. No card from the Middle East.

For Steven Damelio, a menswear sale. Visa offer. Save the Children. And a blue postcard from something called the Apollo Club, with an image of classical Apollo, his marble abs cut sharp, a small fig leaf over ample endowment. Entertainment, dancing, valet parking. Penned at the bottom is, "Hey, Steve, hope to see you soon—Matt."

It's definitely mail the police should know about. I start for the phone to call Maglia. Then I stop. Not so fast. Is this message personal or only personalized? A rub of a thumb across the signature, and the ink blurs. Okay, it's for real. But suppose Matt jotted a few hundred cards for a batch mailing? If I call Maglia about a promotional, he'll demote me even further. Devaney will chortle. For now, the Apollo Club card goes into the junk mail envelope which I'll send to Maglia as promised. A deal's a deal.

With fingers crossed, I'm off to pick up my door photos, this time without Biscuit, because if they're clear enough, I'm heading to Chinatown, a twenty-minute walk at a brisk pace. I pay the clerk, then rifle through the photos. Yes, the three blood mark snapshots are underexposed, but clear. They look more than ever like Chinese characters.

It's nearly five when I get to Stuart Street, then over to Harrison and the side streets where Vietnamese, Thai, and Chinese groceries abound. The windows of golden Peking ducks, the bok choy in bushel baskets, and packets of five-star anise beckon for occasional cooking sprees. Now they're for language drill.

Inside the La Wan grocery, boisterous talk among a group in the back comes to a sudden halt when I enter, a Caucasian intruder. A wizened man in a fedora comes forward as if to guard his real clientele. This is definitely not Tsakis Brothers. I show the photos and ask, "Can you say what this means?" His eyes go blank. I nearly shout the stupid tactic across a language barrier: "*What does this mean?*" He looks at the photos and says, "Door. You door. You want wonton wrap?" I'm not yet outside when the conversation bursts anew.

Next stop, a produce vendor, an aproned woman with wispy bangs who tumbles ginger into a bin while her little boy stacks some sort of fuzzy root. She smiles broadly. A mother, good. I flash the photos. She nods, looks closer, takes one photo out into the sunlight and studies it closely. Her son looks too, and they exchange words. Frowning, she returns and says, "Not have this."

"But what does it say? What is 'this'?"

"Not have." Her bangs move as she shakes her head no and turns back to the ginger.

At the corner I go into a gift shop featuring satin pajamas and the black cotton slippers my Molly loved as a child. No clerk appears, however, so I'm down the block to another grocery where a young couple uncrates what look like charcoal briquettes but are salted duck eggs. This is the Ling Pan store, in which I'm the sole customer. Once again, the photos. Once again, the conferring in Chinese. Then much discussion, debate, hand gestures and pointing at the photos, followed by further debate worthy of

the U N. To my ears, there's not a familiar syllable. Finally agreement is negotiated between the couple. Both smile, nod yes, and fetch me a pineapple.

"Pineapple?"

Beaming, they nod. They insist. The decision is final. My best effort to decipher the blood marks from Steven's murder gets me one overripe pineapple.

'Reggie, sit yourself down. You get light duty today, no heavy lifting."

Nicole. I say. "I'm fine." Which isn't really true because it's been wrenching to describe the murder, also wrenching to see horror deepen on the face of Nicole Patrick, my boss. We're in StyleSmart, the Roxbury clothing store where I work two days a week. It's Thursday, just past ten. I've summarized the last two days for Nicole.

That poor young man, and Jo not gone a year. What a vicious thing, an evil thing. May justice be done. May God have mercy. You need some tea right now." Nicole brings me a cup of Earl Grey from our refreshment nook, her stance and stride confident in slingbacks, an ankle-length black skirt, and carnation-pink silk jacket. She's about five-eight, hair up in a chic arrangement that sets off teardrop gold earrings. Her features are broad, her figure ample. She's somewhere in her forties, her skin between milk and bittersweet chocolate.

Sip it slow, Reggie." Nicole's gaze is empathy itself. "You feelin' the psychic spirit about this?"

My still sore head is too much to go into, so I say no.

"I bet you haven't slept a wink all week."

Not true. The sound of a certain motorcycle circling Barlow Square in the depths of last night lured me into deep slumber as if the cracking exhaust of Starks Harley played Brahms's Lul-

aby. Actually I feel better today." We're in the sofa area. Nicole on a tufted chair.

How 'bout getting iron bars for those first-floor windows of yours? Locks are good, but bars mean business."

I don't know, Nicole. Her goodwill makes my heart sink. StyleSmart, like every other business here on Warnock Street, has a steel front grate for nighttime lockdown because of Roxbury's crime rate.

Nowadays they make 'em decorative. Reggie Vines and leaves hide the bars. I can recommend a welder. You owe yourself the best protection."

"I'll think about it."

"Police, you can't just count on them. They got too much to do. You got to protect yourself. You hear?"

I do. I nod and set my cup on the coffee table with current issues of *Working Woman*, *Jet*, *Ebony*, *Ebony*. I'd hoped for an escapist morning. StyleSmart, you see, outfits women who are recently off the welfare rolls. Nicole and I are fashion consultants for women entering the workforce full-time for the first time in their lives. They need wardrobes, and we provide them at low or no cost. The inventory is donated. StyleSmart is a not-for-profit.

What's up for today?" I try to sound chipper.

"You sure you're fit to work?"

Anything to get my mind off homicide for a little while."

Something I learned in my fifteen years as a caseworker: Reggie, you better face your trouble, or it comes back to bite you hard." Nicole appraises my outfit, a taupe two-piece. "I knew you weren't feelin' good the minute you walked in. You got on those fog colors."

I blush. This is about my wardrobe. As Gina and as Mrs. Martin Baynes, you see, I long favored tasteful neutrals and pastels. This knowledge was eagerly sought at StyleSmart, or so my aunt

told me in her last weeks when she summoned the strength to put me in touch with Nicole Patrick, who in turn flattered and cajoled me into coming to work for her. My job was to create office-ready ensembles for the entry-level women. So I'm second-in-command, but there's a twist.

"Reggie, before you're through today, let's do a little something for your color palette."

"Operation Peacock Reggie?"

She nods and points to a candy bowl. "Colors like those Jelly Bellies."

That's the twist, the nub of things. Nicole Patrick has taken charge of my makeover. I'm her coworker, but also, like the welfare women, I'm her client.

"So meanwhile, Reggie, here's today's project. I'm thinking the store needs a supersize section for our full-figure ladies, but something with a nice name, maybe Boutique Royale. Let's look over here." She leads me past racks of suits and jackets to a corner of the store beside the fitting rooms. "Right here, let's create a special spot, put in a few racks with the nicest big clothes. And I got a trick up my sleeve: we'll cut out the size tags. Nobody will feel like they're getting on a scale."

"How will they know what size?"

"Just hold 'em up and try 'em on, like we all do. With sizes as crazy as they are, why not?"

Nicole, it's a great idea. Terrific. So I spend nearly two hours snipping out size tags while Nicole arranges the racks and waits on customers, one woman hoping to pass a word processing test, another training for restaurant hostessing. Nicole calls me, allegedly to consult. "Miss Reggie, how about this emerald green?" Fabulous with Keesha's skin tone, don't you think? "Yes, I think." "And the sunflower yellow?" Absolutely. She winks to let me know this is a sly stealth exercise for Peacock *me*.

At last we take a break back at the nook, and she refills the teacups. "Nicole, it's been great to play with scissors all morning, nothing but tags on my mind. It's a relief.

"Reggie, that poor young man killed right over top of you. You are sorely tested in these times. And him so close to Jo."

"Close? What did you say?"

"Oh mercy yes, to hear Jo tell it, he was a son to her."

"A son? Steven Dameron? They were that close?"

"Or maybe she meant sunshine."

I nearly choke. "What did Jo say?" It's against my grain to allow long pauses. It seems antisocial. But Nicole won't be hurried. "It's a long shot, but I ask. I hear Steven traveled. Maybe his trips involved his special deal with Jo?"

Nicole adjusts her bracelets. "At least one of them did."

"Which one? Where did he go?"

Nicole raises her cup, eyes me. "Reggie, I don't know what the two of them were up to. But Jo said Steven took special trips to fire up something they were working on."

"And when was that?"

"Over a year ago. I was taking inventory, so it was probably March."

"Was it something financial?"

She crosses her legs. "Reggie, let me tell you something. This part of Boston's my home, and over my lifetime they've called Roxbury a slum, a ghetto, a hood, a community. One name after another, all meaning pretty much the same thing."

Time out for this lesson in urban geography.

"I taught second grade, and then I was a caseworker for fourteen years. Fourteen years. You see things from the inside. Every kind of trouble, it's all right there—drugs, drink, babies born to babies, guns, gangs, everything. I was in and out of the triple deckers, and believe you me, I saw it all."

"Nicole, if you could just tell me—"

But she's bent on her social studies lesson. "You know, Reggie, the way folks think not for profit means free. You know how much fund-raising we have to do. These days a hundred good causes are chasing the same dollar, and that's a fact."

I nod. "Nicole, I appreciate that, but what does it have to do with Jo and Steven's deal?"

She hesitates. "Well, I can tell you this. Jo promised that once the deal went through, StyleSmart would never ever have to worry about rent."

"*Once* it went through? She didn't say *if*?"

"She said if we needed a bigger store, she could make it happen. That was her promise." Nicole shakes her head. "But, honey, I don't believe I know another thing to tell you. Wish I did. Love to help you out. Now, how 'bout that welder?"

Chapter Fourteen

It's midafternoon, 5 22, and I'm parking at the Apollo Club in a seedy warehouse district where buildings are gutted and debris thunders down chutes into Dumpsters. Call this an in-person mail screening for Maglia.

Inside the steel door, I'm expecting replicas of the museum's classic torsos, doubtless the club's theme. Maybe they've fixed the broken noses, replaced the arms and legs snapped off by antiquity's vandals.

Surprise — the softly lighted interior features a backlighted water wall and stone garden ornaments. A bossa nova sound track highlights flute and mandolins. But there's not a plaster Apollo in sight. On the contrary, the place looks ready for *Architectural Digest*.

At the bar, three young men in sportswear sit over mixed drinks in oversize stemware. To the left are high-backed booths. The bartender has buzz-cut hair and a diamond stud in the left earlobe.

Is he Matt?

No, he's Sandy. Matt, he tells me, is in the fourth booth back. Past three empty booths, I find a frizzy-haired man who stares at the screen of an open laptop surrounded by paperwork. Are those spreadsheets? Maybe he's the club's accountant, this man in a dark silk shirt and jeans. Entrenched, he defies interruption. "Excuse me, are you Matt?"

"I am Matthew Kitchel." At last, he looks up, his mouth in a pout, eyes wary.

"I'm Reggie Cutter. May I speak with you for a moment?" He takes my hand as though it's roadkill. It's totally clear I'm in a gay men's club, and therefore that Steven— "I'm here about Steven Damelin. You know him?" Barest nod. "Perhaps you know that he was killed?"

"Everybody knows."

"He was my upstairs tenant on Barlow Square. I— I discovered his body the morning after he died."

He sucks in his cheeks. "I suppose you want to sit down."

This is as close to an invitation as I'll get, so I slide into the booth. "I'm here because of a card you sent Steven from the club. I'm gathering his mail, mostly junk. But the Apollo card had your signature. I thought maybe you could tell me something about him."

"Like what?"

"About his family or friends. I'll need to dispose of his furniture."

"Try Goodwill? Or eBay."

"Surely his friends and relatives would like the chance to have his things."

He closes the laptop and turns the papers facedown. "Ask the cops. Ask the personnel department where he worked."

"Corsair Financial." I'll call, of course. But your card seemed

personal. Look, Matthew, a woman in a gay men's club . . . I'm only trying to do the right thing. I admit that I expected plaster Greek statues."

His laugh is surprisingly rich. "Well, Apollo's a kind of joke. It's from the first name of one of the owners, Paolo. Paolo Gigliarro. You expected the gay stereotype, right?"

Needle, needle. "Actually the club's postcard threw me off the illustration."

"It's a mailing we prepared two weeks ago, snail mail. And so you found our card among Steve's things."

Which implies that I snoop. He thinks his thumbnail against his front teeth. "An Italian insult?" Steven told me he's from an old Boston mill town, I say. He nods but says nothing. "There must be several old mill towns around the city. Perhaps Lowell?" He doesn't respond. "Maybe his family lives there?"

Maybe. Here comes the bartender, Sandy of the diamond stud. Matthew orders his "usual."

I say, "Nothing for me, thanks," and feel at a loss. "So you can't suggest friends? Or family?"

"You should ask the cops about family. About friends, the word is *won't*. You heard me, *won't*." The moment hangs. Sandy returns with mineral water and a bowl of wasabi peas. Matthew says, "Let's be honest . . . if a gay guy gets murdered, the cops are ready to pin it on any gay man who ever dated him. Or didn't."

"You're implying that anyone who takes his furniture—"

"Is a suspect. You're a real bright lady." He taps his tempting drinks, and crunches peas.

I'm thinking of the leather straps fastened to Steven's wrists. Sex strip. "Bondage?" But he knew people here at the club?

He tosses down a few peas. "You want to know who killed Steve? A thousand to one, it's that kid."

"The boy Steven mentored? Luis?"

"Everybody said that kid ought to be locked up in a psycho ward. Or deported. Nobody'd go near Steve when he was around."

"Because he's violent."

"Better a pet tiger than that kid. Steve was a sucker."

"If he's that violent, why did Steven—?"

"Pure pity, that's why. The kid has no father, mother's a wage slave, cleans toilets. They're from Guatemala, maybe Ecuador, one of those hellholes. Steve felt sorry." Matt looks hard at me. "It doesn't take Freud to know Steve was trying to fix his own life, a guy from that shithole—"

"Guatemala?"

"Lawrence, Massachusetts."

"Steven's hometown?"

"Anus of America. It was a mismatch all along. Steve dragged him to the art museum. The kid wanted to go to serial killer movies."

"But that doesn't mean this boy killed Steven. Why would he?"

"To get the golden goose—to rob him blind. We begged Steve not to let that Bigfoot into his apartment."

"Luis was in the apartment that night?"

"Are two and two four? Of course he must have been there. Steve tried to civilize him, invited him up for dinners. He's a big lumbering hulk, hands like catcher's mitts. It was just too damn risky."

"But robbery isn't suspected."

"Not yet, you mean. Listen to me." He leans forward, focused. "Here's what happened. The kid demanded money. Steve said no way, and the kid went berserk. Maybe he didn't plan to, but when he heard no, he flipped. That's what happened."

"Matt, what's Luis's last name?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Do you have his address?"

"Are you crazy? Didn't you listen to me? They live all over the city. They're everywhere."

"But the police—"

"Fuck the police. They don't want the truth, they want one of us. They're phobic fucks, and they don't care."

Chapter Fifteen

Three Damelins are listed in Lawrence, Massachusetts, starting with a soft spoken woman who doesn't know Steven but thinks genealogy might be fun, then a teen who asks, did she win some kind of prize? Number three is a raspy male voice recording that growls, Leave a message. I do, assuming that Detective Maglia has already covered this ground. Family members could be potential suspects, and police interviews double as interrogations. Maglia and Devaney will tell me little or nothing.

Though I left a message informing him of my visit, Maglia hasn't called me for a report on the Apollo Club. Nor have I called the welder about window bars. Nor have I ventured upstairs, not even to inspect Right True Clean's work. To face that apartment alone . . . tomorrow, I tell myself, tomorrow for sure. A tuna salad and pear make do for dinner, and I take Biscuit out before dusk, lock every lock when we return, and then hack away at the Chinatown pineapple, which gives the kitchen a pleasant

fragrance but makes me feel stupid, as if the bloody door's a vile joke. The markings and fruit make no sense. No one returns my call from Lawrence.

It's early evening, just after seven, and I'm in the front room scanning Jo's books for something right to read when my eye is drawn to the top shelf with the green bottle. This is no time to start dusting, but the bottle naturally reminds me of Steven and of my aunt. It's a pale green, and it sits between a wood carving and a bronze figurine, all formerly Jo's, all up high. On impulse I climb on a chair, take the bottle down, dust it off, hold it under a lamp.

It's a stout and sturdy whiskey bottle, and the bubbles and waves in the glass mean it's quite old. The neck is long enough to grasp, and it tapers from broad shoulders like the body of a sentinel. QUART, it announces in embossed glass capital letters, though there's no sign of a glued-on label. The glass itself is molded with a brand medallion: Blanchard & Farrar, Dock Square, Boston. I can imagine it corked and filled with whiskey. It looks, actually, like a bottle in a saloon from the movies. Steven called it a boyhood household item, not an heirloom. Presumably his family did not cherish it, though I could be wrong about that.

Did he give it to Jo to cement their "deal"? Did he request the bottle from his family or snatch it as his due? Of course, Jo welcomed the gift. That was her nature. I can picture her here in this room exclaiming with delight. Was it startling when the gift channeled an otherworldly scene as she held it? Steven was emphatic about Jo's psychic vision when she grasped it. She heard yodeling and something about a skull. Something positive, too. What? My memory's hazy. I was so rattled by my hit-and-run.

The Blanchard & Farrar QUART needs a quick wash. In the kitchen, a squirt of detergent and warm water, and I'm soon dry

ing the glass, which shines brightly I've rehung the towel and grasped the bottle in both hands when a low grumbly hum begins It's like an electric light before the bulb blows No, not quite that It's changing, getting louder

I look around, still gripping the bottle My kitchen lights glow steadily Now the sound is guttural, the volume swelling It's discordant, a cacophony of several sounds They pour out and gather in and around the mouth of the bottle Voices yes, the swelling sounds are human voices caught up in argument They're knotted in arguments, disturbed, frightened too Yes, I sense fear It's dark and cold, but the voices are heated—though not English It's another language Slavic? I see whiskers and smooth skin, men and babushkas Children cry

Another sense of things is also present, mixed in with fear It's a certain energy It's positive It's forward upward It wants to lift. It wants to take flight.

Then a sharp crack My head, my skull as if I myself am targeted with a blow My knees start to buckle It's glass on bone I'm stunned, holding the very bottle that's struck the blow "Ouch."

Biscuit whines and jumps against my leg I put the bottle down and stand back She barks as if to drive away intruders, then snarls as if she too, enters into these arguments "Biscuit, quiet down, girl. Sshh quiet now" I pick her up smooth her fur We soothe one another for long moments, and I gradually comprehend what has happened I have entered into the vision that Jo experienced when she held this very bottle From aunt to niece, the vision is essentially the same.

Did Jo translate it? Did it teach her? Did she learn? Or did it puzzle her as it baffles me? How did she manage to put it up on the living room shelf? Did she endure the voices and risk another

crack on the head as she teetered on a stool or chair? Maybe Steven shelved it for her.

But Steven is dead. And Jo is dead. I'm on my own. Facing practicality. I quickly wrap the towel around the glass to avoid touching it directly. Biscuit, sit down, girl. Sit. I then stand on the chair and put the Blanchard & Farrar QUART right back on the highest shelf, out of range.

But not out of sight. Back down, I touch my head. It hurts. It's sore in two places. First a log, now a bottle. What next? Steven is dead, my formerly bloody door mocked by pineapple, Magic Marker, Frank Devaney from Minnesota and I'm under assault by my precious gift of a sixth sense. Swathed in self pity, I grab a book and pray eventually to be called to sleep this Thursday night by the roar of a Harley motorcycle.

It's Friday 9:00 a.m. I'm in a gabardine skirt and jacket and nearing All Souls Church a few blocks from Tremont. The temperature's dropped again, down to the low forties. The air is clear and the sky a bright blue as I enter a church that smells of stone and burned candles. Rev. Gail Welch sits at a broad desk in her office off the vaulted sanctuary. Her handshake is firm and fast as I introduce myself and apologize for not phoning ahead.

No problem. What can I do for you? Close-set brown eyes survey me at a glance. Wearing slacks with a shirt and twill blazer, Rev. Welch is trim verging on spare. A clerical robe on a peg by the door is the sole sign of Gail Welch's calling. She motions me to a chair by a stack of hymnals, Bartlett's quotations, and books on rooting. Following my gaze she says, "We're in a century-old church with a slate roof that's falling apart. Some shortages aren't covered in divinity school, such as keeping the congregation dry on Sunday mornings in rain and snow." She gives me a quick scrutiny. "So you're Jo Cutter's niece?"

Yes. Her Barlow Square town house has been my home since last winter."

"Well, then, how's it feel living in a saint's shrine?"

Instantly speechless, I find myself laughing hard for the first time in days. Gail Welch's smile is sardonic. "Your aunt was a treasure, and we all miss her. But everybody's life must go on in their own terms. Jo'd be the first to understand and approve." The minister gives me a searching gaze. "Sometimes life can feel like chaos theory in action, Reggie. I won't be coy. News of the murder is all over the South End. Doesn't the worst news always travel fastest?"

"At the speed of light."

"It's specially hard on the All Souls community. We're in shock because the victim took part in a program we administer."

"Big Buddies?" She nods. "That's the reason I'm here, Rev. Welch. I found your name in a letter in Jo's files. She knew the man who was murdered, and I sublet my upstairs flat to him based on their acquaintance. He told me he volunteered as a Big Buddy. I'm hoping you can tell me about the boy Steven Damelin mentored . . . Luis."

I'm sorry. Our program records are confidential."

I expected this, but I have a strategy. "I'm not asking for a profile, only Luis's full name and address. You see, Steven told me he planned to give his buddy a gift, a blue Lava lamp he was sure the boy would like."

She twists a pencil. "Maybe one of our staff could see that the young man gets it."

"That's good of you, but, frankly, I have a selfish motive. It'll help me cope with the tragedy to present the lamp in person. Steven was devoted to Luis. If I could go to his home and give him the lamp and look into his eyes and say a few words . . . you see, the police have authorized me to dispose of Steven's furnish-

ings and I'll feel so much better to represent his last wishes in person."

She hesitates.

I lean toward her as if to confess. "I found the body, you see. This request is for me too. It would help so much. Both psychologically and . . ."

"Spiritually?"

"Exactly." I sit with folded hands while Gail Welch inwardly tussles with this conflict: the rules of the Big Buddies program versus Reggie's heartfelt request. Yes, I've put her in an awkward spot, but can a minister resist a spiritual plea? Surely not. I sit quietly with eyes downcast and demure.

Finally the minister murmurs, "Excuse me. I'll be right back." I catch a whiff of her scent: green tea, and for the next fifteen minutes barely move until Rev. Welch reenters the office holding a slip of paper. "This is the full name and address. He lives in Jamaica Plain."

I stand, my fingers laced reverentially. "Rev. Welch, how can I thank you? I can't begin to express my—"

"Save it, Reggie." That sardonic smile returns. "Twice around the block in a clerical collar you learn a thing or two about maneuvers."

"I don't understand."

"There's almost always a spiritual angle."

I start to squirm and flush.

"Folks think piety pays. Often it does. But there's no shortage of faith-based scams. We ministers hear at least one daily pitch. It's only nine-thirty a.m., and you've met my quota."

My cheeks are fiery.

"We'll probably be involved in planning a memorial service. Maybe you'd like to lend a hand. As for Louis Jo Cutter told me

you had her psychic gift. And that means you're probably working with the police. Is that right?"

I nod.

Then I'm betting this slip of paper is a psychic's head start on a quest for justice. Here at All Souls, we go in for justice. We think it has a spiritual side. I'll be in touch about the memor... service, and we invite you to come join us some Sunday.

Who's on my front stoop when I return but R. K. Stark, one hip against the door frame, lounging as if 2" Barlow is a Hell's Angels hangout. The Harley is parked against the curb. He says, "Good timing."

Terrible timing. He's come to take Biscuit. Must I beg for a few more days with her? With shiny new door keys turned in the new locks, I open up, pausing while Stark certifies Right True Clean's "good job" on my door. I try to be stoic as Biscuit goes into raptures and I brew a pot of robusta. Stark leans back against my countertop and says, "You're back to late, Cutter. Getting some sleep?"

For the second time in an hour I blush. His nightly patrol has made Barlow Square a comfort zone. He deserves appreciation, not resentment over the dog. "I never thought a Harley would sing me to sleep, Stark. I'm very grateful."

No problem. Bikers like to ride. As you'll soon find out.

Oh no. I can't take that motorcycle course. I've changed my mind on that."

"Your check is cashed."

"Consider it a contribution to . . ."

'The Motorcycle Safety Foundation. They expect you.'

"I'm too busy."

Not that busy. You like riding on Batso, right? Right? In fact, I do. Straddling the bike, holding on to Stark as he weaves

through traffic and roars along the Charles, well, it's a thrill. Wild and free, Cutter. Now that Brando's gone to the great beyond, you got me and Fatso."

I also have Stark's version of personal care, as he and I both know. He's rescued me in the nick of time more than once on the bike. The notion that I ought to be able to operate it — we both agreed I ought to be able to take over in a pinch. It seemed sensible at the time — and exciting too. That, however, was then.

"Stark, I have a murder on my mind."

"All the more reason. You need an outlet."

"Need?" My chest suddenly gets hot. It's the years-long pent-up heat that a woman feels. "Stark, all my life, various men have told me what I need. At this point I am at liberty to decide for myself what I need."

He does the hands-up surrender, but his stance is sinewy, and I see irony. In silence I pass his mug and sugar. He says, "Don't get in an uproar. The biker course, we'll get to it. I'm here for something else."

"For Biscuit."

He shakes his head and slurps his syrupy coffee. I smell tobacco. His gray eyes are flecked with amber. That razor-straight mustache, he must trim it daily, wherever he lives. I'm never sure, because he lives — so to speak — off the grid. And possibly hand to mouth, except that a Harley Fat Boy model costs many thousands, so I don't know. His cell phone links me to him, but not to his whereabouts. "How's your upstairs, Cutter? Cleaned up good?"

"I . . . I haven't gone up there."

"Too busy? No problem. I'm here to help you move the guy's stuff."

"Steven's furniture? But where?"

"Downstairs," I think, confused. "To the basement. My former

home, remember? You're gonna need a new tenant for the next few months, right? Unless Doc Tooth shows up."

Good Lord, I hadn't thought it through. The next month's rent... Stark is right, I need the income. I'll need a tenant fast.

"So," he says, "you're up for heavy lifting?" He's shamelessly surveying my upper body to guess whether I can shoulder my end of Steven Damelin's furniture. Before the move, before the blue cat, before my knee and elbow and the purple bruise on my calf, I did four sets with ten pound free weights every other day. It's about my arms in sleeveless clothes. Or it was. Stark's irises flicker with doubt.

"Let's go," I say. "I'm on."

For one thing, these South End houses were not built for hauling bulky durables up and down the narrow halls and staircases. Furniture must be upended and angled, and I never was that good at geometry.

We go upstairs. I've now changed into jeans, sneakers, and an old Northwestern U sweatshirt of Jack's. At Steven's door I take a deep breath, and we enter rooms thick with pine disinfectant. The furniture arrangement would surely revolt Steven—as if Right True Clean learned room interior design from TV sitcoms.

We go room to room, bed to bath, all spick-and-span everywhere. No sign that anything bad happened here. I say softly. But I tug out a drawer which is jammed with papers, rolls of tape, combs, scissors. Could any of these ordinary objects be clues? "The police took a lot of stuff."

And left a lot too. Stark carefully guides a pencil into the same drawer, retrieves a staple gun, which he pincers between two fingers with a handkerchief. "Something like this," he says. His eyes look sly. "You never know."

I watch him put it back. Deft fingers, a sure touch. What did he do in the Marines? He seems to have the skills of a criminal.

and a Delta Force commando. Which are the same skills, when you think about it.

We move on, though an empty, mournful feeling takes over. For the first time, those Egyptian tombs furnished for the afterlife make sense. Without the person, the possessions lose their life too.

Stark lifts a zebra headboard, more bulk than weight. We carry it together. He is testing me. Damned if I'll falter. I must admit, the man has a genius for spatial fit. If he says the headboard will clear the stairs, it does. Ditto the chairs, chests, and a bookcase.

Then the basement, an issue in itself because of the claustrophobia that lurks in my very rib cage. Fears aren't conquered. They live inside forever, at best in remission, at most kept at bay. Stark carries down a small table, which rattles. I pull out its drawer, which is empty. How come it rattles?

He feels the sides and top and chuckles. "What a thief." The top slides in a groove, and here's a hidden compartment, which is filled with cell phones.

"Whoa, that guy was Mr. Cellular."

"Do they work?"

He shakes his head. "They're too old."

"Nokia, Motorola. I count eight."

"Nice. A bank." He slides the table back together while I shelve the Lava lamp. "How'd the guy live with this stuff?"

I look him in the eye. "He didn't. Cheap roaches."

We continue working, and the furniture gets heavier. "How's your pretty fingernails, Cutter?"

Ruined, every one. "They grow fast, Stark."

I give no hint of my claustrophobia, but my arms start to tremble while Stark is just warming up. I think of those boot camps where people survive only if they cooperate, my ex, Marty,

who was dangled by ropes one time at a company retreat and vowed never again. Finally the last big piece, the sofa. Let's go, I say.

Stark shakes his head. "Sofa's too heavy."

"Have I dropped my end yet? Have I?"

He ignores me. "Couple weeks, I can get somebody to help."

"I can help." The truth is, I'm ready to collapse.

"Forget it, Cutter. We're knocking off for the day."

We stand on a landing. I offer him a drink. He says no. We go downstairs.

"What about the bloody door?" he asks. "You find a translator yet?"

I tried. I took my photos to Chinatown. How about some pineapple? Because that's what I got out of Chinatown, a pineapple. I called the colleges, but the professors of Chinese seem too busy to get in touch. I should camp outside one of their office doors."

Let me have one of those snapshots you took.

You know somebody who reads Chinese—if it's Chinese?

"Maybe." The usual Stark response. Where specifics are concerned, the man is a black hole. "What's next, Cutter? You gonna plan a sidewalk furniture sale?"

I might go to Jamaica Plain. There's a boy Steven mentored in a program, Luis Diaz. I have his address. Or I might go up to Lawrence to try to talk to Steven's family."

Lawrence? Tough town. You know where they live?

"I'm working on it."

He gives me a sideways look. "Tomorrow?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, tomorrow."

"What time?"

"Probably after breakfast."

"Let's make it eight. I'll get the dog and take her for a run, then we'll go."

"So you're not taking Biscuit with you now?"

"Cutter, if there's one thing you need, it's a watchdog. If there's one thing a beagle is bred to do, it's bark like the devil. Give a listen for Fatso after midnight. Ciao."

I've showered and cleaned up and had a bite when the phone rings. It's Devaney.

"Reggie, how you doing?"

"Not bad, Frank, considering. The cleaners did a good job. That helps."

"We thought we'd hear from you by now. How's the mail? Ed's hoping you'll spot something useful."

"What about the sheet of penciled numbers the cleaning crew found behind the mantel upstairs? It was a Corsair Financial sheet, and I sent it to Detective Maglia. Did he mention it?" Devaney grunts, and I can't tell whether it's a yes or no.

The rest is mostly junk — autumn markdowns, credit card come-ons. I've sent the whole batch. And I stopped by a club that Steven patronized, the Apollo Club. I left a message about it for Detective Maglia. It's a gay men's club. A manager named Matt Kitchel knew that Steven was murdered.

Devaney doesn't choose to discuss this. He changes the subject to neighborhood patrols. "They're unmarked cars in your neighborhood, Reggie. I shouldn't tell you, but look for dark green Chevy Impalas."

"Frank, what about the lab report on the blood on my door?"

"It's not in yet. They're backed up."

"And the markings — has a language expert seen the police photos?"

"It's the damnedest thing. Everybody we've tried is unavail-

able at the moment. Ed says they must've chartered a plane to Beijing. Or maybe Tokyo."

Hilarious, Frank. Wonderful to hear that Homicide has a sense of humor."

"Reggie, hang on. We're working on leads. I expect to get back to you early in the week. Be sensible. Take care. We'll be in touch. Just one thing. Ed asked me to remind you. Homicide wants to know if you plan to leave the state."

Chapter Sixteen

Saturday 8:03 a.m. Here's Stark on Fatso. He's in the same outfit, the jeans, boots, the USMC jacket. In minutes we're in my Beetle on I-93 north. Biscuits settled on the back seat on a towel. Gripping the wheel, I say, "We're going to 59 Croker Street."

"That's the Damelins' place? You're sure?"

"I'm guessing. I got the address off the Web and matched it with a phone number." Stark studies the route map and says the passenger seat feels like a Spam can. A truck cuts in, and he mashes a phantom brake.

By 10:15 we've crossed the Merrimack River by the brick hulks of abandoned mills and exited into a section of old three-board houses on narrow lots. Croker Street comes up on the left and I hit Frozen Knish Brass sports play street to key in front of 59, which is an asphalt-shingled bungalow with a sagging roofline and flaking paint. A jalopy with new taxi lights in the driveway says Clarence Cox operates service in crooked Gothic lettering.

This can't possibly be Steven's family home, but there's nothing to lose. "It's worth a try. I'll be right back."

Stark grunts and stays put. Biscuit naps. I ring the bell, hear nothing inside, knock hard. A face appears at the two little shadow-box panes, and the door opens slightly.

In the woman's thin face before me I see traces of Steven, except that her expression is wary and weary, as if all his boyishness got reworked into hardship. In black sweatpants and a faded blue cardigan, she could be fifty. Or seventy. She wears no makeup. Her hair is the inky black of a bathroom sink dye job. Could she be Steven's grandmother?

Her voice is pinched and nasal. "What is it?"

"My name is Regina Cutter. I'm from Boston. I'm here about my late tenant, Steven Damelin. Are you a relative?"

Her chin trembles. Her eyes are filmed over. Cataracts? Cataracts of pain. She starts to speak.

But a man bellows, "Who's at the door, Doris?"

I recognize the vocal rasp. It's the voice on the message machine. Doris seems to shrink as he suddenly looms up behind her, unshaven with graying hair, thick furry arms, and piggy eyes. His soft pale chest is blazoned with a faded tattoo of a nude dancer. He clamps a hand on Doris's shoulder and glares. "Whatever you got, we don't want it."

"I'm here about the late Steven Damelin. I'm looking for his family."

"Shut that door, Doris."

"But, Char—"

"Shut the goddamned door."

Bam. The hockey stops dead with a shot that sends the pink ball under the cab. The boys gather at the edge of the driveway. One pokes his stick toward the bumper. It doesn't begin to reach. Inside the Beetle, Stark is on his cell phone. Biscuit's nose

is a black button against the window glass. The kids appoint a player to retrieve their ball and the boy walks as if the asphalt might split open and swallow him up. The front door opens again. It's Doris.

You kids, get offa this property right now.

She eyes me, hesitates, then grabs my elbow in a forced march down the walk. She does not look at my face but says, "Hinkton Avenue, number 869. You want to talk to Crystal." She repeats the address and Crystal's name, still pressing my elbow. As Stark and I drive away, Doris is poking underneath the car with a hockey stick she wields like a broom.

A blue curtain parts a few inches when I knock at 869 Hinkton, which is a gray clapboard duplex a few blocks from Croker. Stark got directions from an Amoco cashier. Otherwise, we haven't spoken.

In this open doorway, I face a woman in her late twenties, her cheeks more chafed than rosy. She's dark-eyed, about my height but big-boned, wearing tight leggings and a green Polo Ralph Lauren shirt. Around the eyes there's maybe a hint of Steven. She holds a baby in a hot-pink jumper that says "Spoiled Rotten By Grandma." The complexions of mother and baby are pallid. The baby, about eighteen months old, clasps a Barney.

"Are you Crystal? Doris sent me to talk to you. I'm Regina Cutter. I've come up from Boston. It's about Steven Dame in—"

"You another cop?"

"No. I was Steven's landlady just before he died."

"I'm not payin' his rent. You're out of luck."

"This is about Steven's furniture. It's for his family."

Her eyes suddenly glitter. "I'll take it."

"Could I talk to you for a few minutes first?"

She motions me inside, where it smells of sour bedding and

burned toast. In the kitchen, she points to a dinette table and puts the baby in a high chair with a Fig Newton from an open package. A TV plays in another room. "This is Faith."

"Hi, Faith."

"She's named after Faith Hill, the country music star."

I know nothing about country singers, though Jack tells me Marty's Celina is an ardent fan. "Crystal, I'm mainly here about the furniture. But I also understand Steven Dameron knew my late aunt."

"Late? Everybody's 'late.' Way too late, that's what I think." She sounds like Doris but harder. "Cops too."

"The Lawrence police?"

"No, Boston. Two of them. A million questions."

"Devaney and Maglia?"

"The dark one had clear nail polish."

"That's Maglia. They can be tough."

Faith feeds Barney a slobbery Fig Newton. "About this furniture, is it leather?"

"No. It's upholstered fabric and wood. Was Steven a close relative?"

"He was my brother."

"Your brother." Shocking. "And so Doris is—"

"My mother. Our mother."

Not the grandmother. I've skipped a generation. I now see a family resemblance at the jawline, except Crystal has an overbite. No orthodontist for her. At the sink, a faucet drips. "I tried to talk to Doris," I say, "but your father—if it's your father—"

"Slammed the door, right?" I nod. "That's Charlie. He's pissed because he couldn't slam the door on the cops. Did Stevie have a recliner? I could sure use a nice La-Z-Boy. What about his sofa?"

"We'll get to that, Crystal. When did you last see your brother?"

"Three years ago. You gonna tell me about the furniture or what?"

"Your brother died in my house. I need to know a few things. This is strictly personal."

She leans closer. "When you're the landlady and he's the tenant, then it's not personal."

"Crystal, Steven's apartment is directly over my own. My security is an issue. Which makes it very personal."

She bites a cuticle and scowls. "So ask your questions."

The faucet is a drumbeat. I remind myself this woman has just lost her brother. Even if they weren't close, she's probably reeling from the murder. "I want the same thing as the police – to find out who'd harm Steven."

"No idea. Like we told the cops, Steve was long gone. Horrible he's dead, just that, but we lost him years back." She wipes cookie from the baby's mouth. "Crystal, I now see, is pregnant, I'd guess five months. There's no sign of a man around."

"Did you recently talk to Steven on the phone?"

"No."

"Or visit him in Boston?"

Side to side, her hair whips her cheeks. "No."

"And your parents?"

"Them neither."

"As far as you know."

"As far as I – hey, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Maybe your father gets a fare to Boston from time to time. Doesn't he drive a taxi?"

Runs old ladies to the senior center and drunks home from bars. But she blinks a little too fast. "I mean it never saw Steve – which don't get me wrong, I don't think so – he couldn't never tell me or Doris."

Crystal says no more, but has opened the possibility, however

slight, that Charlie Damelin might have picked up Steven at curbside on Barlow Square as Trudy Pfaeltz said hi. A soap theme plays. *All My Children?*

So you saw Steven three years ago. A family visit?

"Three years ago last May. Doris was sick and needed a home aide, and Stevie helped us out with arrangements. I mean, if you call that a visit. Which I don't. Stevie didn't even stay at the house. He got a room in North Andover at a country inn. Him and his friend. The whole city of Lawrence wasn't good enough.

"He came with a friend?"

"Alex somebody."

"A girlfriend?"

Her sharp laugh startles the baby. "Try again."

"Alex's mate?" She brushes back Faith's hair and nods. "Do you remember Alex's last name?"

"So you can give him some of the furniture?"

"Crystal, Steven's things are for your family. If you'd just try to recall the last name?"

"He's some kind of dancer. Ballet, whatever. It was a first-name basis. They stayed two nights — no, three, because the old man tried to convince Stevie about a Hummer."

"A Hummer?"

"For a hearse. The cab business isn't great. The old man thinks he'd do good with a Hummer to rent for funerals. He wanted Stevie to go in with him. They had a big fight. The old Damelinski temper . . ."

"Damelinski?"

"It's Polish, or Lithuanian. The whole family came from the old country and worked in the mills a hundred years ago. Lawrence was a big mill town. They were spinners and spoolers and weavers. All the women worked in the mills. The men too. It's all gone. There's no jobs to speak of. Raytheon laid everybody

off, now I'm part time in a parking garage. The Hummer hearse idea. I thought Charlie had something. Stevie turned him down flat."

"And that's the last time you saw your brother?"

"Last time. Now, how about that furniture? You got a list?" The faucet drips on. Crystal reaches for a box of Newport Lights.

Is this what I've come to Lawrence for? To learn that Steven Damelin had a dancer boyfriend three years ago and did not spend one night in the family home where he grew up, or even inside the city limits? And to find out that Steven was a working-class kid who somehow reinvented himself, a bootstrap boy who fled his family?

No, it's doubtful that he did the whole Horatio Alger thing all by himself. Somebody groomed Steven. Who? A few more questions, Crystal. Steven mentioned a deal with my aunt. He worked for a Boston company, but let me ask this: when you were kids, did your brother think up different get-rich schemes?"

"He shoveled walks in the winter. We did a Kool-Aid stand in summer. What do you want to know this stuff for? You sound like a cop."

"Not me."

"Or a school counselor. I hated school." But Faith wails, and Crystal leaps to fill a bottle with Hawaiian Punch. The baby grabs and sucks. Crystal slowly sits back down. "You ought to talk to the Voglers."

"And who are the Voglers?"

"Too good for us, too high up for the Damelins. For the Damelinskis."

"Who are they?"

"You're giving me Steve's furniture, right? All of it?"

"That's why I'm here. First the Voglers."

"Kidnappers."

"Kidnappers?" It's a jolt.

"That's what I call the whole bunch. Oh, the Voglers didn't just grab my brother off the street. People like that operate different." She lights a Newport white. Faith sucks her sticky hand. But the mood has shifted. Something's on Crystal's mind. "This goes back. Way back." She inhales. "You probably did good in school."

"I did okay."

"None of my teachers knew I existed. Biggest part I ever got in a school play was a carrot in *Peter Rabbit*. My costume was an orange garbage bag with armholes." She exhales sideways. "Little Stevie, now, he's Robin Hood. Doris sewed him a velvet costume by hand. Little tiny stitches, beautiful if you like art that. My brother, the little star."

That's tough on a brother and sister. Stop. Reggie. Forget the amateur therapy. Tell me about the Voglers.

She lays the cigarette in an ashtray, wets one finger, tamps Fig Newton crumbs on the table, licks them. "This third grade volunteer lady fell in love with him—no, not what you're thinking. I mean—special attention. He was real small and everybody thought cute as a button. All of a sudden, Stevie gets horseback riding lessons on Saturdays. You know how a kid loves to ride a horse? Me, I get a carnival ride and the ponys had dead. Stevie's the . . . what's that word, starts with an *e*?"

"Equestrian?"

"They got him boots and a velvet hard hat."

"They? You mean the Voglers?"

"My brother was pals with their precious Andrea. He got in right with the whole bunch, *Dora* and the little princess of a sister, Dani. It's Dani, with an *i*. They rode their horses and won ribbons. Yellow and green, shiny satin ribbons. Myself, I won a pair

of goldfish at bingo. Saturdays I watched cartoons. The closest I got to a horse is this shirt Steve left when he came to help with Doris and blew up at the old man. Ralph Lauren Polo, that's my horse."

"And Steven stayed in contact with the Voglers?"

She flicks the ash. The faucet beats time. Comes high school, surprise! Stevie the Star wasn't going to the regional high. Not him. The Voglers got him into Alden Academy. She says the name in a nasal exaggeration, *Awl-den*.

I recognize the name. We considered it for Jack the year Marty got furious about the science fair awards. "It's near here, isn't it?"

In New Hampshire. The kids live there. And precious Stevie got scholarships and went with his buddy Andrew. That's when he got, like, too good for the rest of us. That's when Doris finally got clued in. I mean, my mother was *for* all this stuff. Couldn't get enough. She'd scrape mud and horse crap off Stevie's riding boots and shine them like she was making out with the boots.

She flicks the ash again. I'd Vaseline my Mary Janes, ten minutes and you're done. Doris, she'd spend hours. Her Stevie was the prince. It was Voglers this and Voglers that. They paid for his braces. They took him skiing. Not here in New England. Our snow isn't good enough. They all go out West where it's soft if you land on your ass. Some place with a *B*."

"Breckenridge." Crystal glares as if I'm a double agent. I say nothing about the Baynes family ski vacations. "Crystal, where do the Voglers live?"

"Outside Boston someplace. Stevie went there most weekends."

And your father? What did Charlie think about all this?"

"Charlie Damelin never turns down something free. You see the backyard?"

"No."

There's a carload of scrap glass somebody gave him for nothing. And old pipes. It's like a junkyard. Always was. My old man called the Voglers a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. He thought my brother's luck could rub off. When he got smart, it was way too late. The Voglers—to be polite, you could say they sort of adopted Stevie. Truth is, they stole him. Those people had their own son. Why take somebody else's? In this moment Crystal's gaze turns mournful. The quiet moment hangs.

And that's how Steven dropped out of your family?

"He went to the same college as Andrea. Scholarships right and left. They have a bastress. That's who Steve worked for in the summer. And then after college."

"Corsair Financial?"

"I guess." She nods again. "In Boston."

"It must have been difficult."

"Diff-i-cult?" She says it in the Ander Academy voice. Stevie could put on a real show for everybody. My brother was the actor. There was a part of him they didn't see."

"What part?"

Crystal looks at me, bites her lip, takes two quick puffs—perhaps to gauge what she's willing to pay me in exchange for the furniture. I lean forward, eager to hear it all.

But just then the baby fusses, and Crystal ramps up, goes to the fridge, pours a refill, then sits in silence.

I try to recover the moment. "Crystal, it would help if I knew anything . . . unusual about Steven."

But she kisses Faith, smooths her hair, hands her a ring of plastic keys. "She's teething. Molars."

"Poor baby."

And she's gonna be a star. She's gonna get her chance. Faith gnaws at the keys and gurgles. How about the furniture now?

"About Steve, you were saying—?"

Lady, you got enough. You want a pint of my blood too? Or a quart?"

With pen and pad, I start a list of the chairs and tables and lamps, everything stark and I hauled downstairs yesterday, except for the Lava lamp. And what about the green whiskey bottle? It was Jo's, now it's mine. Though maybe Steven swiped it from home. "Crystal," I say, "Steven gave my aunt an old bottle from your family household."

"That ugly old thing? Doris wondered where it disappeared to."

"Steven gave it to my aunt. Is it a Damelin family heirloom?"

She snorts. "It goes back to the Damelinsk. times. Amazing it's not busted. My grandma used to tell about a neighborhood called the Plains. You know that line about the fruited plains when you sing 'America the Beautiful' in school? We thought it meant the old mill neighborhood here in Lawrence. All I know is, they lived on Brook Street near the Spicket River. The bottle is from back then. We tooled around with it when we were kids."

"Are there family stories connected to it?"

Something about a big strike. She shrugs. "We don't want it back, if that's what you're getting at. Good riddance."

"One last thing, Crystal. Do you remember the town where the Voglers live?"

"How should I know? I never went there. I never even met them. They came in a big white Jaguar with black windows. They never got out. You couldn't see their faces. But I'll tell you one thing." Crystal starts to sniff, wipes her nose. "Steve told me once — he was home watching TV and said he never really fit in with them. That's what he said. All that skiing and horseriding, he never felt like he fit." Her eyes mix greed and resentment. "Hey, you gonna send a U-Haul with the furniture or what?"

"I'll let you know. One more thing. Did Steven swim?"

She squints. "You mean when he was a kid? In summer?"

"In water with a heavy current? Did he dive off logs?"

"Mostly in a public pool. Once a summer or so, the old man took us to Hampton Beach."

"Any logs there?"

"It's an ocean beach. It's got fried clams and sand."

"How about creeks? Or rivers?"

There was a pond with a float. I got a bad splinter. We were real little. I think a storm wrecked it. That was a long time ago. Why, what's this about?"

"Just wondered."

"Yeah, whatever." She shrugs, scrapes wet cookie from Barney's mouth, and spreads fingers across her stomach. "This one's gonna be a tea. kicker. And my Earth here, she's gonna have dance lessons and go on TV. She is."

We rise. I get her phone number. "There will probably be a memorial service for Steven. You and your parents might want to come."

"Don't bet on it." Her hard dry laugh startles the baby. I rise and say good-bye. Outside, the October air hits hard. What did I expect, the name of Steven's killer? Or that syrupy moment they call *closure*? At curbside Spark stands against my car like a sentinel and reaches to open my door. I get out my key to signal I'm the driver, I'm the one in charge.

Chapter Seventeen

There's no Alex or Alec or Alexander on the Web pages of the Boston Ballet or the Fresh Pond Ballet or Jose Mateos Ballet Company. Each of their phones answers with a machine recording.

I want to know whether Charlie Damelin's anger was turned in murderous rage on the estranged son who refused to finance a Hummer. And whether the Damelins understood their son was gay. And about the Voglers. And Luis.

I'm also desperate for input about the blood markings on my door, which is why I'm back to the Beetle by 5:30 p.m. heading south on I-95 toward Providence in open defiance of Maglia's order. It's Reggie-in-revolt when I cross the state line and am welcomed by a big sign for the Ocean State. Rhode Island and proceed to my Molly's basement apartment in a colonial clapboard, a house chopped into a rabbit warren for students—talk about landlord profiteering. She answers the door in black pants and cut-way down to here tank, her warm smile a mile wide

dark eyes twinkling and clear. When we hug, I feel her heartbeat, which takes me back to the very beginning. I hold on tight, and for a moment, so does my daughter.

We part laughing. Her raspberry hair looks like scissored shingles. As for the frog tattoo on her ankle, tiny though it is, I'm thrilled to see her.

"Mom, let's go eat. I'm starved." She slips on a jacket.

"It's cold, Mol. Don't you want to zip up?"

"You mean I should cover up, your R-rated daughter. Jeez, some things never change, do they?"

That defensive tone. Will I ever learn? Molly directs us to an Indian restaurant with sitar music and rush-bottom chairs at a wobbly table with a guttering candle. Somehow Indian food always looks like a brownout, and I can't quite cope with the menu names. "Curry," I say to the fine featured waiter, "not too hot." Molly orders as if it's as familiar as a Happy Meal. Which I suppose it is. The breads are excellent.

"Yum," I say.

"Yum." Then, "Mom, tell me, how are you?"

It's a role-reversal moment, with Molly as the parental daughter. I try a hot puffy bread. "I'm doing fine. The police are great. They patrol night and day in unmarked cars."

"Do they have suspects?"

"Molly, as helpful as they are, the police don't tell me. Nor should they. But they're working very hard, and they have their leads. I'm confident. I really am."

"Are you working with them?"

"As a psychic? Not just yet. I'm doing some other work. In fact, I need your input after our dinner."

It's served, muddy lumps of vegetables with a nice creamy white yogurt. The tandoori bread is lovely. Molly compliments my ensemble. "That violet top is like, forefront."

"Let's say I've got a personal shopper."

"And how about the postcard guy? Any more Sphinxes?"

"Not lately."

"I thought he was hot for you, Mom. What's his name?"

"Knox. Knox Baker."

"So when's the hot date?"

"No idea, dear. Believe me, it's downright weird when your daughter asks about the maternal love life. We're acquaintances, Molly, and he travels a good deal. I have a collection of cards. Kuwait, Bahrain."

"Mr. Frequent Flier."

Let it go at that. We eat in silence, then I reach into my purse. "Mol, I want to ask you a favor. I got some snapshots developed. I need your opinion."

"Sure. What is it?"

My strategic lie is ready as I hand over two photos. "This is kind of a forensic quiz, Mol. The door marks you see in the pictures were found upstairs on the door of the victim, Steven Damelin." Molly holds them close to her face.

"The police are trying to figure out whether the killer stained Steven's upstairs door accidentally or whether the marks are deliberate. Before his door was cleaned, I took these. I thought you'd know whether they were intentional."

She holds the pictures near the candle. "No contest, Mom." She bites her lip. "But maybe a sponge instead of a brush."

"But deliberate?"

"Absolutely."

"You're sure? I mean, really sure?"

"It's deliberate application. Notice how that line swells at the middle, then tapers off." I nod. "That's a stroke. That's on purpose."

My stomach is turning to ice.

'So you tell that to the police," she adds

I reach for my water, my insides now flash frozen "I'll tell them."

She holds on to the photos "Of course, it's calligraphy"

'Calligraphy, I thought so too The police are looking for an Asian language specialist."

"Tell you what, Mom, the more I look at the mark, the more it looks like Chinese characters, but let me ask Tom Chou He's a sculptor His family s from Taiwan " She looks up The murdered guy, he wasn't Asian?"

"No."

"Interesting, isn't it?"

"Fascinating My mouth is dry No matter how much water I sip in these moments, bone-dry Molly orders rice padding "Mol, your Aunt Jo never talked about a Chinese connection, did she?"

"Chinese? Jo? No, not to me ' Molly throws me a suspicious glance "This is from the dead guy s door, right? Nothing to do with Jo—nothing to do with you?"

"Nothing at all."

'Okay Maybe Tom Chou can come and look I'll call his studio right after we finish ' But her phone battery's low, so we head back to her apartment There's the futon, the chair draped with clothes, her sink full of dishes, an easel at the end of the room I know not to look till invited She makes the call

No answer from the Chinese sculptor Maybe Tom's away for the weekend I ll try him tomorrow Leave those snapshots here

I'll leave you with one of them, Mo. Here take this one And you'll contact Tom first thing in the morning, okay?

Probably noon Most artists I know are owls You want to check out my new painting? Go ahead, have a look

I sidestep a mound of books, sketch pads a pizza box I m

ready for anything, bugs, animal innards. No longer do I second-guess Molly Baynes. 'Will I be shocked?'

"Mom, you'll like this one. It's a little on the dark side, a little dreamy, sort of Ryderesque. You know Albert Pinkham Ryder? No? Well, you can probably figure it out."

It's a moody water scene, somber, murky, even eerie. There's some kind of driftwood. A canoe?

The longer I stare, the more I feel dazed. My gaze locks on this canvas, on the scene painted there. Molly speaks, names the things pictured on the canvas before me. Water, she says, and "log."

The spot on my scalp throbs, and I realize my daughter has painted the very scene I already know in every cell of my body.

Chapter Eighteen

My daughter's painting is the clincher: the water-and-log vision must be reported to Frank Devaney, even though it has no relation to a man drilled to death and nailed like upholstery. Light traffic on I-95 gets me back to Boston in record time. Biscuit beats her tail on the rug like a tom-tom of welcome. I take her out, refresh her water, wash up, and get ready for bed. The morning can't come soon enough. I sleep restlessly, and the dog and I are both up at dawn.

Nine a.m., my phone rings, and it's Maglia calling me to the precinct house for a talk.

It throws me. "Will Frank Devaney be there?"

"Your go-to guy?" His laugh sounds like a dry cough.

But I'm shaken, guilty as charged for crossing the Massachusetts state line without Homicide's permission. Maglia had me followed, or caught my license plate on a highway surveillance camera. I am clearly a "person of interest."

"Will ten-thirty this morning work for you, Ms. Cutter?"

"I'll be there, Detective Maglia."

Summoned or invited, I'm there on the dot. Maglia greets me amid a swirl of blue uniforms. "Appreciate you coming, Ms. Cutter. There's someone we want to talk to you. It's about the blood on your door. We have an expert in the Chinese language, and there are a few questions."

Maglia says a name. Hu Lee. That's how I hear it. I'm weak with relief. It's not about sneaking off to Providence but rather about translating the bloody calligraphy.

We enter a side room with a small conference table and chairs with wine-colored cushions. A beefy man rises, about forty and well over six feet, his hair as golden as wheat, cheeks pink, eyes blue as the sky. In his starched white shirt, he looks like a football linebacker out of Norman Rockwell as he shakes my hand and says, "Hugh Lee."

Hugh. So it's Hugh. He motions me to a seat at the head of the table, which wedges me between him and Maglia. He opens a briefcase, spreads eight-by-ten black and white glossies on the tabletop, and turns them my way. "You recognize these, Ms. Cutter?"

I believe they're taken from the door of my home."

"Yes, they're police photographs. I've agreed to review them, Detective Maglia and I know that you may find them disturbing. We don't mean to upset you."

"I'm eager to know what the marks mean, Mr. Lee. And you're a law enforcement official?"

A forensic linguist, Ms. Cutter. Tell me, have you studied East Asian languages?"

"Never."

"Perhaps you have friends or acquaintances familiar with Japanese or Korean?"

"I don't think so, no."

"How about Chinese?"

"Not to my knowledge."

No one at all who knows Chinese? Take your time. We're in no hurry."

Seconds pass. I'm on the spot and draw a blank. My former husband traveled to China and Japan on business. He brought a few gifts for our children. That's the extent of it."

Does anyone known to you dabble in calligraphy? Perhaps a hobbyist?"

I wait a decent interval. "Nobody I can think of."

"I'm told that your daughter is an artist, Ms. Cutter."

"Molly? My Molly?" A cold stab. Was I in fact followed to Rhode Island? Have they probed my family background? Hugh Lee's bright blue eyes don't leave my face as if he scans every feature, every muscle and reflex. "Molly is a painter," I say. "Mostly she sculpts. Nothing that's Asian. Surely you don't think my daughter . . ."

Lee gives me a waxy smile. "Ms. Cutter, we must consider every possibility. Let's talk for a moment about the language itself. It's fascinating. Chinese uses about four hundred sounds. Did you know that?"

"No."

"The trick is in the pitch and tone. And context."

I look to Maglia for some sort of support. He studies his lacquered nails. "Mr. Lee, I told you, I never studied Chinese."

"Well, here's a linguistic factoid for you: a simple word like *ma* can have several meanings, such as horse or hemp or scold. Did you know that, Ed?"

Maglia says no, he didn't know.

I'm nauseated and chilled. This diversion doesn't fool me for a minute. Lee implies that my door was marked by someone I know. He drags Molly in, and so far says nothing about my door.

His eyes seem fixed on my face, as if he's testing me. I say, "This is interesting, Mr. Lee, but I know no one who speaks or writes Chinese. Surely we're here to discuss the written form, the calligraphy."

"You mean the characters, the ideographs."

I do. "And perhaps you could explain exactly what a forensic linguist does." I point at the hideous photographs. "These blood marks on my door appeared after the murder of my upstairs tenant. I'm very worried. What do they mean? I need a translation."

A fair request, Ms. Cutter. First, about my background as linguist. I come from generations of missionaries. We're all from Kansas and Idaho, but my great-great-grandfather was in China during the Boxer Rebellion. As for meaning, why do you think these marks *mean* anything?"

Because they're deliberate." He exchanges glances with Maglia, as if I'm underage. "Well, aren't they?"

Arms folded, he bends forward. "Ms. Cutter, you know about nonsense syllables?"

"Of course."

They can appear in any language. English has no monopoly on nonsense syllables. Which makes sense, doesn't it?"

Treated like a grade-schooler, I murmur, "Yes, it does."

"Or take jazz, the scat singing?"

"I don't see what that has to do with—"

It may quack like a Beijing duck, but in fact it's not. It's nonsense."

You're saying these markings mean nothing?"

I'm saying that Detective Maglia is doing you a great big favor to seek to have these photographs properly examined. Yes, they seem to be Mandarin characters. But a quick glance tells me they're caricatures. Your tenant's death is terrible, but for your peace of mind

you can forget about these." He gives the photos a dismissive wave. "Don't give them another thought. They're meaningless."

I don't believe him for one minute. Whatever the door markings mean, he won't tell me. It's his and Maglia's secret. I'm summoned here only to be looked over, to be given an ad hoc lie detector test with those sky blue eyes. Between Hugh Lee and Maglia, I'm out in the cold as the days get short and winter looms.

Well, I can play my game too. "Oh, Mr. Lee, I'm so relieved. For all I know, those marks could mean anything. Why, they could mean . . . I don't know, vegetables or fruit, let's say a pineapple. Do you know that the pineapple is a traditional symbol of welcome? Wouldn't it be ironic if the Chinese character for welcome were written on my door in blood?"

His eyes narrow just a little, and his corn fed grin looks set in concrete. "*Bore le-u ar*," he says. "That's Mandarin for pineapple, *l-o-l-u-o*. You might enjoy a language class, Ms. Cutter. It might turn a worry into a nice hobby. We thank you for your time this morning. May our paths cross again one day."

May they not. It takes everything to shake both men's outstretched hands and exit the precinct house. There's no sign of Devaney, but I can't hang around like a groupie, so I call from the nearest corner and leave him a message. I also try my daughter, whose phone is off, though Tom Chou is more crucial now than ever. It's 11:22 a.m. My next stop is a bookstore on Tremont where I buy a Chinese dictionary and a Spanish phrase book, then take the T to Copley and walk back to Barlow Square as the air stays in the low forties.

As always, I scan the street and town house for a mental all clear, then head inside, grab a bite, and change into a sweater and jeans. Molly phones to say she hasn't reached Chou. My Realtor

friend, Meg Givens, says she has a few prospects for my upstairs sublet and wants to schedule showings. Good.

It's after 1:00 p.m., and I'm planning my call to Steven's former employer, Corsair Financial. Access to the Vogler family might be a long shot, but Crystal's tale raises huge questions. Am I cynical, or is the story of the kid plucked from poverty simply too good to be true? Kidnap or rescue, Steven's story demands a closer look, especially since he worked for the family that saved his life before his murder. I pick up the phone. Two computers that have been found in the late Steven Damelin's apartment may in fact belong to Corsair Financial. I say minutes later to a creamy voiced Ms. Kline in Human Relations. Technically this is true.

She replies that Corsair Financial believes it has all of the late Mr. Damelin's computer records. She hastens to assure me the firm is cooperating fully with the investigation.

As am I, I say. Here goes the lie. But as Steven Damelin's landlady, I'm nervous because the laptop and desktop computers I just discovered in his apartment were overlooked by the police. Also some disks."

Ms. Kline answers in a tone of forced neutrality that Corsair's internal systems are state of the art. Do I detect an undercurrent of alarm? Push it, Reggie.

Maybe I'm not being clear, Ms. Kline. You see, Steven Damelin's apartment contains computers that the police missed in their search. My first impulse was to contact the detectives, but as an investor, I'm mindful of business priorities. I thought to myself, a firm's business data is crucial. So I decided first to contact Corsair Financial."

Pause a moment to let this lie sink in. Ms. Kline, I hope you understand the position this puts me in. If Corsair isn't interested, then, of course, I'll notify the police without delay. How-

ever, if Corsair is interested in retrieval of the equipment I'll need to speak with a high ranking executive as soon as possible I believe that would be Mr. Vogler."

She burbles about Mr Vogler traveling and unavailable I reply that my deadline is the close of the business day tomorrow End of call The timer is set Cross my fingers

I then put my one snapshot and tissue paper tracing of the bloody door markings on the kitchen table beside the English Chinese dictionary, which is opened to the page with the character for pineapple.

The comparison ought to be simple do they match yes or no? Close-up, however, the images look alike then different, then alike They're like piles of tiny matchsticks If you think it's simple, try it.

I flip back to the word murder just to see But actually "pineapple" looks rather like murder In fact, of the twenty characters denoting murder, at least four look to me quite like pineapple." Could Hugh Lee be telling the truth that my door marks are meaningless? Or is the bottom line this Hugh Lee reads Chinese To Reggie Cutter, it could pass for cuneiform

It's 1 15 p m when I get the Lava Lamp from the basement and hit the Jamieway, goaded by the caustic voice of Matt Kitchel of the Apollo Club.

No I won't directly confront the volatile Luis Diaz Mainly this is afternoon surveillance The Lamp, however might be useful I tuck the Spanish phrase book in my purse like a passport

I'll need it Mozart Street, the address Rev Gail Welch gave me, rings with the language I skipped in school There's a Baptist church, a basketball court tot lot, and spray fountain closed for the winter though teeming with squealing kids A travel agency sign reads Viaje a Santo Domingo con Sierra Travel ' Luis's block features duplexes and triple deckers all apartments

Nobody in his building goes in or out. In the car I sit and wait. Mozart Street feels sleepy. Siesta time? The Lava lamp is on the trunk.

Hola. Me presento: me llamo Senorita Reggie Cutter. This is my phonetic opening to a woman in flamingo pants, platforms, and a stretchy V-neck wrap top with pink hibiscus. She's somewhere in her thirties. Minutes ago, I got out of my car, went to the front porch of the triple-decker and called out, Hola, hola. She appeared at the doorway. Of the six mailboxes on the porch, not one says Diaz. My phrase book is ready. Estoy buscando Luis Diaz. Thick with mascara, her dark eyes show no sign of comprehension.

Or is it no sign of a willingness to talk to me, Ms. Gringa? I fan the phrase book pages. ¿Conocer Luis Diaz? She looks blank. Could his name trigger the passivity of someone wanting to avoid trouble?

Flip to another page. ¿Sabe donde puedo encontrar Luis Diaz en el bloque de apartamentos? She shrugs, shakes her head no.

"¿Habla inglés?"

"No." A sloe-eyed no, but no it is.

Mumbling *gracias*, I retreat as two voices deep in the stairwells of the triple-decker erupt in call and response Spanish. I'm almost at my car when down the sidewalk toward me come three Latino young men in black. Is Luis one of them? I step aside.

Another threesome comes up from behind, as if cued, muscles like ropes. One wears a wife-beater T-shirt in the forty degree weather. Behind dark glasses, they suck toothpicks and stare. One of them muses his cell phone. He's bulkier than the other two. Is he Luis?

Suppose they're gang members. Crips, Bloods. Are the six closing in? There's cop in sight. My car is just a half-block down. Forward in a fast, hard walk along the curb, I pass a TV

cable van, the technician nowhere in sight I walk faster They do too I clear the van just as one of them from behind taps my shoulder.

"Hey."

Still no technician, but I'm almost to my VW

"Hey"

Tap again If it's robbery and assault, I'm about to be the gringa victim Give up your purse, Reggie Let them have it

"Hey, lady, this is yours?"

He looms, a hulk holding a little book A Spanish phrase book, it's just like mine.

It *is* mine.

"You drop this, yes?"

I teach Yes Yes, thank you *Gracias* He grunts Breathless, embarrassed, I clutch the book Is this I uns' Tongue tied, I can't ask. The Spanish is hopeless, and English a whiteout in my brain Laughing, they wave me off The moment is lost

Chapter Nineteen

It's after 2:00 p.m. Tuesday. It's crunch time for "Ticked Off," and I'm shuffling paragraphs when the phone rings a familiar creamy voice that asks, "Regina Cutter? This is Cindy Kline of Corsair Financial. Hold, please, for Mr. Leonard Vogler."

The man himself. Bull's-eye.

"Vogler here."

The voice has the remote sound of a speakerphone in a large space, perhaps a hotel suite far from Boston. "Mr. Vogler, this is Regina Cutter. Many thanks for the call, especially at this dreadful time." I'm using my Junior League voice. "Mr. Vogler, I only met Steven Damelin shortly before his death, but as his landlady, I'm disposing of property in his apartment. Some of it may belong to Corsair Financial. I trust Ms. Kline mentioned my particular discovery of computers that the police somehow overlooked."

Miss Cutter, we use SPARC workstations, which serve the financial services industry. A home computer could be donated to

charity. Perhaps a school. We can handle that. We'll send someone immediately to take the equipment off your hands.

"There are personal things too, Mr. Vogler, perhaps keepsakes for Steven's coworkers. I could make a selection."

"We have a good many personal effects, Ms. Cutter."

One last try, though if I fail, a Corsair courier will come for the computers, and that will be that. So here goes. "Mr. Vogler, if you have just one moment. I have spoken to Rev. Gail Welch of All Souls Church here in Boston's South End. Steven Damelin was involved in a mentoring program through the church, a program to help disadvantaged children. Such an important program, really inspiring to us all. I've agreed to help Rev. Welch plan a memorial service. Though I barely knew Steven, he was quite close to my late aunt, who knew him well." Here goes the family pitch. "My aunt was devoted to Steven. He was like a . . . a grandson to her."

"And a son to me, Miss Cutter. A son and brother to the Vogler family." The voice swells, Shakespearean. "We ourselves have begun to discuss a memorial service."

"I'd be so willing to help, in homage to my aunt's affection for Steven. Perhaps to coordinate. The mentoring of young children, what could be more important? Why, you yourself understand firsthand."

A pause, then a snuffling. "Actually, Ms. Cutter." He clears his throat. "Ms. Cutter, it's possible my wife would be interested in talking with you."

Talk to the Voglers? Son Andrew too? In a Corsair Financial conference room, perfect.

"In fact, if she agrees, perhaps you'd be free to pay a call at my home. We live on the North Shore."

The shore. There's a water connection. Play this, Reggie.

"My wife is not well. She is confined to our home and might

welcome the opportunity. Arrangements . . . well, my wife would be grateful."

Mr. Vogler, whatever I can do to help. In any capacity whatsoever." He promises to be in touch very soon, within a few days. I agree to give a Corsair messenger the computers this very afternoon. A true CEO, he puts his assistant on to handle specifics.

Motorcycle school requires long sleeves, trousers, leather gloves, and boots. Stark has forced me into this. The school provides the bikes gratis from local dealers. It's Saturday, and I'm in denims and red cowboy boots, which Nicole scrounged from a closet at StyleSmart. They're a size too small, and my toes tingle—though circulation in my feet is the least of things. My daughter has checked in to say that Tom Chou needs somebody else's help to decipher the Chinese characters in the snapshot. I don't know why, neither does she. Devaney seemed bored by the fog and water of my psychic vision. He refused comment on Luis Diaz except to say that surveillance is a waiting game, that an afternoon stakeout is nothing. When I asked about the credentials of Hugh Lee, he replied that Homicide sometimes hires a freelancer or borrows a federal agent. He wouldn't specify FBI or ATF or Homeland Security. I ran out of agency names.

There's no invitation so far from Vogler or his wife to the North Shore. A young woman Corsair employee came for the hard computers within an hour of my talk with Leonard Vogler, so the firm has now known for days that the hard drives were already yanked. I at least hope to seem harmless though well intentioned. If I'm forced to call Corsair again next week about the memorial service, I'll need a new strategy. Mustn't sound overeager.

Listen up, people. We listen. The instructor is the walrus

mustached Vic whose jacket rains fringe. "Folks, believe it, your bike is not a toy."

We believe. To walk a motorcycle in a figure-eight pattern is to learn its heavy, clumsy, dead weight. I'm between a bald guy in ballistic nylon and a slender child-woman who speaks broken English. Stark is stationed by the storage shed at the edge of the parking lot. He's an assistant, which proves he has some human association and is not a total loner.

"Your transmission's now in gear? Which gear?"

"Neutral!" This from the bald guy who plans to tour the Rockies with his bride in the rear seat and Miles Davis in their headsets. His jumpsuit is emblazoned "Just wing it."

"Prepare to mount . . . mount!"

Legs up and over we straddle. My feet feel the raised pavement.

"All riders ready?"

We nod yes. My bike's gas tank I notice is dented, meaning that it has taken over or been dropped, or as Stark says, kissed the asphalt. We're instructed to ride in a big circle around the vast parking lot of a community college. "You're gonna look *through* the turns."

We lip-synch, *Through* the turns. I do my Zen stare through the helmet face mask. We're all soldier heads today. The bikes growl to life and we ease out into a wide circle, motorized.

Vroom. Three times around and we throttle to 5 mph, which feels somewhere between Evel Knievel and the Wild Bunch.

On the ninth or tenth round, however, my bike somehow or other swerves and veers from the group. It feels programmed, actually, homing by itself toward an asphalt curb that looks over a foot high . . . higher.

Me and my closest geriatric woman cohort ditch that curb. I grab the brakes — too late. I'm launched by the handlebars and toot

pedals. It hurts like hell, but stifle the groan, Reggie. Not one audible *ouch*. A woman has her pride.

You okay? At Vic's signal, all engines stop. The moment is solemn and ridiculous. My leg is jammed under a wheel, and my feet feel like concrete blocks. "You okay? Anything busted?"

I lift the visor and shake my head as he lifts the bike. Pack me in ice tonight.

The slender chile-woman asks, "¿Se fueron los frenos?" Stark shakes his head. "¿Hay huesos quebrados en las piernas?"

To my amazement, Stark gets zoos in rapid fire Spanish, including *nada* and *no problema*. Since when is this man bilingual? He needs no phrase book. He speaks the language. This info is worth its weight in gold. It's worth a batch of oatmeal cruises. A Jamaica Plain plan is hatched right here and now.

You know what you did wrong? Stark asks a short time later. It's lunchtime. I'm across from him over meat loaf hash and a grilled cheese (mine). We're at a neo-"authentic" diner with items like "Cuppa Joe" and countermen in turquoise bowling shirts. "You know your mistake?"

My mistake? Expecting a quarter ounce of sympathy. "Since when do you speak Spanish?"

You made a classic mistake, actually two mistakes. What were they?"

Getting sucked into a motorcycling course. I forgot the foot pedal."

Right. The bike spun out. What else? Gotta debrief, Cutter. You steered for the curb because you fixated on it." He smacks fist into palm. "I've seen riders T-bone into trucks, smash into trees—"

I get the idea. We chew. So where did you learn Spanish?

"Picked it up."

"In Boston?"

"Maybe Mexico."

"You lived there?"

"Maybe Cuba."

"The Marines? Guantanamo?" He doesn't reply "You sound fluent."

His eye gleams with the devil's own sparkle "You think I'm just a dog-sitter, Cutter? I'm full of surprises"

I don't doubt it for a minute "I need your help Stark I want to track down the boy Steven Damelin mentored He's known to be violent A friend of Steven's thinks he killed him"

"So motorcycles don't drive murder off your mind?"

"His name's Luis Diaz A minister gave me his family address, but nobody named Diaz lives there Nobody would talk to me I took a phrase book. It's phonetic."

His laugh booms over the jukebox doo-wop "Where was this little side trip of yours, Cutter?"

"Jamaica Plain."

"Then the kid's probably Puerto Rican or Dominican"

"How do you know?"

"Because Salvadorans and Mexicans like East Boston

"But you'll go back there with me?"

"Your U.N. translator? I'll consider it."

"It has to be yes."

His gaze narrows "Eat up, Cutter you got a big afternoon" He stops my protest "Okay here's the deal You pass the biker course and I'll help track down Luis Diaz"

Late Monday afternoon, I'm back to Mozart Street, Stark at my side Still no call from Vogler It's cloudy at 55 p.m., and icy, thick raindrops suddenly begin to fall from a lead gray sky, a low pressure system from a sputtering hurricane far out at sea The Lava lamp is in a bag under my left arm as we climb the front

porch and go down the central hall to the same curtained doorway on the left. Salsa music plays somewhere on a radio in the building. I'm still sore, but I somehow passed Biker 101 with a D minus. This time it's Stark who calls out. Hola, and here comes the woman in flamingo, though today it's hot orange. Seeing me, she pouts and blinks her face tight. Stark however launches in with a little bow. Buenas tardes señora. ¿Como estas? He keeps up a line of patter and she begins to nod and murmur. Then says a few words as he goes on, raising his voice because it's now raining hard. Soy de Boston, he says. ¿De dónde eres?"

"Miraflores."

"Ah, Miraflores. Tropical. La naranja. La mimosa."

Even I can pick up *mimosa* and *naranja*, but she crosses both arms over her bosom as if to shield herself from the wicked heaven itself. Stark introduces us by name, and he translates so I learn that she is Carmen from the village of Miraflores in the Dominican Republic. Just when it seems as though he'll never get to the point, Stark finally says, Estoy buscando la familia de Luis Diaz.

At Luis's name she freezes and gazes down at the floorboards. Looking up her eyes are filmed with fear. Is this about a school problem? she asks Stark. Is Luis in trouble again?

"¿La escuela? No."

Ask her about his schooling, Stark. Ask whether he has any friends. He gives me the are you nuts look. "It's about my door, the marks."

¿Amigos? Mayor tal vez but she's not really sure. In America kids come from everywhere. Her son is not his own man or. She doesn't know who his friends are. Carmine watches her stance as if to brace herself to ask. ¿La policía?

No, no. Stark shakes and points at the bag. "Tremos un regalo para Luis."

A gift? He takes the bag and shows the Lava lamp. The gift changes everything. Carmine's relief is palpable. But Luis, she tells us, is sleeping. He doesn't feel well. He cannot be disturbed. Perhaps we could come another day.

Stark enters into a complex negotiation that seems to go nowhere. The rain is pouring in icy bucketloads. In moments, we'll dash through it to the Beetle. Just now, however, somebody thuds onto the porch and stomps down the hall toward us. He's big, his footsteps thunderous, his body soft yet muscular and bulked. He's in cargo pants and carries a basketball. He drips from head to toe, and water pools at his enormous feet. "Mama, esta lloviendo!"

It's Luis.

Carmine looks mortified, but Stark grabs Luis's hand and pumps it man to man. Or mano a mano. It saves the moment, though Carmine doesn't know what to do. She faces the boy as if to air-dry him with plumes and jets of Spanish. I suggest we all go inside. Stark makes the request to Señora Carmine. With great reluctance, she parts the doorway curtain. We go in.

The kitchen is spotless, the dinette table centerpiece a casserole dish set on a lacquered wood tray. We sit down. The fridge is covered with shapshots of smiling babies, children, family groupings against a background of banana trees. One pantry door, however, is splintered, and the wall by the stove is patched through the paint and plaster. The hole is the size of a fist.

Luis's sneakers squish on the linoleum, and Carmine wraps the boy in a beach towel. His wet, curly dark hair frames a broad-featured face with heavy-lidded dark eyes, a wide nose, and mouth with full lips parted just enough to reveal the space between his two front teeth. His hands, as Matt Kitchel said, are huge, and the nails of his right thumb and index finger almost black. From trauma? From a death struggle with Steven? Could it be?

I say, "Luis, we're here to give you a gift." He squints but says nothing. "We have something from your Big Buddy, Steven."

"Steven? From Steven?" He breaks into torrential Spanish, his voice cracking. I hear *muerto* and *policía*. Carmine strokes his arm.

"We're not the police," I say. "This is from Steven's apartment. He wanted you to have this gift. It's a lamp."

"And the *película* . . . the movie?"

"What movie?"

"The video?" His eyes are wide, eager.

"I don't know anything about that." His gaze shifts. He's no longer interested. "I don't know about a movie. Here's what I brought." I take the lamp from the bag and put it before him to gauge his reaction.

There is no reaction. "Do you remember this lamp in Steven's apartment?" A shrug could pass for yes. "You visited his apartment, right?"

He mumbles, "Couple times." Carmine hastens to tell Stark that Steven's death has greatly saddened Luis. She pauses while he translates. The police came and asked questions, and this upset him very much. She speaks as though her son isn't present.

"Let's plug in the lamp to make sure it works," I say. Carmine rummages for an extension cord. Voila, the deep glow of cobalt blue. I try to buy time. "Let's wait for the bubbles."

Stark asks Luis about baseball, then *futbol*. I notice a kitchen door panel that's shattered. "Kicked out?" The kitchen so neat, why the damage? From Luis on the rampage? He says he likes American *futbol*, likes the NFL. A metal tray table by the stove is dented as though it was toppled. Or thrown?

Oooh. The lava bubbles up. We all watch it, and Carmine prompts her son to say *gracias* to Señorita Cutter and Señor Stark. But Carmine sees me steal a glance at the dented tray table and punched plaster. Clasping her son's arm, she speaks insistently.

breathlessly, to Stark. Luis is a good boy, she says. He has a hard time in Jamaica Plain, the cold winters . . . and is homesick for his grandparents and cousins. In Miraflores, people help out. It's different here, she says, you're on your own.

Stark nods and translates fast while Luis sits like a toweled Buddha. Carmine leaves the apartment at 5:30 in the morning, she says, and Luis gets himself off to school, summer school too. She cleans hotel rooms and wants a better life for him. There was a hurricane in Miraflores, and her parents feel too old for a teenage boy. TV . . . *americano* TV is full of monsters that turn boys into *bruto*. Luis has high spirits, she says, like his Uncle Tomas. The police don't understand high spirits. Yes, sometimes Luis is angry. A boy in a new country, it's not easy. Sometimes he forgets himself. But see how Luis helps out. He's learning to cook. Yesterday he prepared *pollo loco* and sun rice. Maybe he'll be a chef.

The object of all this attention, meanwhile, sits as if waiting for the aliens to go. The rain has lessened. The Lava lamp bubbles on. Carmine has testified on her son's behalf, and now she rises, our signal to leave. As we stand, she points to the centerpiece tray, picks it up, and shows the finish, the handles. *La bandeja*, she says, was Luis's gift to her on Mother's Day, a good American holiday. Her son made it himself in woodworking.

"Wood shop?"

"Sí." Very good with his hands. Good with tools. Steven helped with this.

"Helped how? Stark, ask her how."

With care for the tools. "Tener respeto."

"What tools? Stark, ask about the tools."

But we're at the curtain, then ushered outside to the porch. Luis is sports crazy, like all boys, Carmine says, but later he will use his good hands for a good future. Perhaps Luis will be a *carpintero* because the tools fit his hand like gloves.

Chapter Twenty

You like barbecue? Detective Frank Devaney holds a take-out bag as he reaches to open his car door to let me in. "Sandwiches and slaw for two. Get in. Let's eat."

It's Wednesday, just past noon. Moments ago, my cell rang and Devaney asked my whereabouts, which was Boylston Street. "Meet me on Columbus by the Park Plaza, Reggie." I hustle over there and within minutes, he pulls in behind a taxi parked curbside at the hotel. He's brought an autumn drive-in picnic. "No cup holders. Here's RC. You drink RC?"

I do. He unbuttons his houndstooth jacket, spreads a napkin between us, aligns plastic forks just so as if setting the table, and opens the foil wrappers. I'm eyeing the police radio gear in the dashboard. There's a portable blue light on the floor. If Devaney is ready for a high-speed chase, do I ride along? Why has he phoned me? Maybe it's about the Chinese markings.

"Here, extra sauce." He puts the salt and pepper packets in place, uncaps the slaw, and disposes of the tops. He points to my

sandwich. "At my house, nobody will eat barbecue. There's a course on pork and beef ribs next month, and the teacher's a Memphis chef. But I can't take it. My wife saw the sauce mop once. It reminded her of a dirty floor. Here—more napkins. It's *picante*." I bite in. He says, "¿Está demasiado picante?"

Frank—no Spanish. Stop it. Devaney blinks, and so do I. "Sorry, Frank. For a second there, I thought—I'm way off balance. First the Chinese marks on my door, now Spanish. Don't get in a twist about this. Two days ago, I went to Jamaica Plain to find the boy Steven Damelin mentored."

"The Latino kid."

"Yes. I took him a memento from Steven's things, from Big Buddy to Little Buddy. It was pouring rain. His mother let us in, and a friend translated. The police—I take it you've already questioned him?"

He takes a bite. Juvenile has its own records on Luis Diaz. He was caught with a *bomba*—that's a homemade pipe gun. And yes, on your tip, we questioned him in the Damelin case.

Steven's murder, now it's the Damelin case. "Was he questioned by Maglia?"

"By Detective Xavier Soysal."

"And is Luis a suspect?" As if Devaney would tell me.

"It's a process. We don't know yet. It's taking time. A good many people."

Including Steven's father? Steven fought furiously with his father, you know."

He ignores this. "It's looking for certain specific people."

"Someone named Alex? A dancer?"

Hey, Reggie, back off—it's enough you're nosing around Jamaica Plain. His raised brow is a storm warning. "Anyway, that kid's got his troubles."

'His mother says he's high spirited. If it were my own son, I might say the same thing. Maybe you would too.

Devaney chugs his RC. "The Latino groups are all different. Your Dominicans, there's a lot of back-and-forth to JP. Jamaica Plain. Fares are cheap, families live in both places."

"So Magda's afraid that Luis will escape? Go back to his home village?"

Devaney reaches for the slaw. "I'm saying there's a family dynamic. A parent comes for a job here, say, cabdriver or hotel housekeeping. The kids stay back on the island with the grandparents. The fireworks start when they're teens."

"My friend says the kids play the parents against the grandparents."

"He's right. Kids mess up, they're out of control. Then the parent brings the kid to Boston to straighten him out, and there's a language problem, the kid's behind in school. It spirals down."

"To murder?" Do I repeat Carmine's words, "the tools fit his hand like gloves"? It could assist the police or help convict an innocent boy of homicide. For now, I nibble coleslaw and keep quiet.

"Your aunt liked barbecue."

This is an odd change of subject, and something else that Jo never mentioned.

I'd stop and pick up a bagful when we worked together. I gave her my pickles. She loved pickles on a sandwich. He crumples his wrapper, bags the trash. I realize this is not solely about sandwiches. "She sat where you're sitting, Reggie, and told me what she saw, her psychic visions." He looks straight ahead through the windshield. "It had its complications. Don't get me wrong, Jo gave me information, but it was up to me to piece it in, find the fit."

"I understand."

"But I never disrespected her. Not as far as I know." He turns toward me, as if forcing himself to meet my gaze. "Reggie, I didn't show appreciation for you, imagining Steven Damelin drowning."

"I didn't imagine it, Frank. I saw it. My sixth sense—"

"You saw him in a body of water in which a log is floating."

"I have a sore spot on my head from the log—and this is a recurring vision. I know there's no clear connection with a body drilled to death and nailed like upholstery fabric to the floor. I know that, for you, the vision is irrelevant."

Low-grade static crackles on the radio, but the moment grows quiet. The brake pedal squeaks as Devaney, now distracted, pumps it and stares off as if absorbing what I've said.

He picks at a cuticle and looks me in the eye. "A preliminary autopsy report came in today," he says. "And some things check out, certain DNA matches. Things we've expected. Then again, some things not expected. There are other results we won't have for some weeks." He reaches for a roll of Tums, peels the wrapper, and bites a tablet. He straightens his tie, a field of turkeys.

"Is there something you can tell me?" I ask.

"Yes, something new. I should've listened to you, kept an open mind. But it's this: the report shows substantial water in Steven Damelin's lungs. The point is, we're now looking at a new theory of the case. We're looking at drowning as a possible cause of his death."

It's midafternoon. "Ticked Off" is due, but I swirl and spin with the pathology report on Steven's death—and the frustration. Yes, Devaney is now a born-again believer in my psychic ability, and the sore spot on my scalp gains new respect.

So what? Steven's murderer is no closer to ID and arrest. The

Chinese markings, Luis, the dancer lover, and now the drowning . . . none of it makes sense. Steven and Jo's dead. I haven't a clue. Stark insists that Biscuit stay on Barlow Square as a watchdog, which tells me he thinks I'm endangered. Devaney swears the police patrol is stepped up in my neighborhood, though seeing is believing, and I have yet to spot the green Impalas he insists parrot Barlow Square. So I have my doubts. Yes, the pathologist and my sixth sense are in sync, but the case is so wide open it's **shapeless. The killer runs free.**

I'm midway in Ticked Off when who calls but Mr. Frequent Flier, Knox Baker, just back in town from the pyramids. His voice is deep, filled with apology for keeping me waiting while he traveled. He makes a joke about postcards and suggests a **leisurely lunch tomorrow.**

Weeks ago, his call would be a thrill for sure. Now? Now he's a voice from another planet. I ment on StyleSmart and tell him I'm at work until noon tomorrow. We agree to meet. I'm not even sure what he looks like; it's been that long.

Back to Ticked Off . . . tips on luggage etiquette. Playing Footsie with Roller Bags. Meg Givens is due in two hours to show my upstairs rental, but what if Steven did stash something in the apartment? On TV narcotics teams search toilet tanks and ovens. Suppose something is stashed up the chimney and the cops missed it. Grab the flashlight and take a look.

Yet dread rises with each stairstep. Steven's body, the blood, the nails . . . the scene flashes in the blast zone of my mind. My fingers twitch, and the key scrabbles at the new lock of the upstairs flat. **Breath held, I open the door.**

The place reeks of pine cleaner, and my heels hammer the hardwood. Briskly I raise the blinds, turn up the heat, open a window, and briefly run the kitchen faucet. The living room stops me: the center seat cushion of the sofa shows the impress of

a human body. With all the hauling, I hadn't noticed this effigy of Steven. Clearly this was a favorite spot, and it's somehow touching.

Don't ask why, but I sit down right there to feel between the cushions. Before I can work my fingers down inside, it comes over me, the log and water, the twisting and feeling of Steven himself. The spot on my scalp pulsates.

This time I let it happen. Don't resist, Reggie. Close your eyes, feel the feeling. It's a wrenching but familiar space hollowed by his very body.

So powerful, the water, the log, the torque in my hips and legs. I sit still as the moment passes, then take a deep breath and dive in the cushions. Not even a palmful of change. I go into the bathroom, lift the porcelain tank top, turn on the flashlight, and look inside. There's the orange-brown water stain of an old commode, the ball and lever.

The oven is empty. Then on to the chimney, where I kneel at the fireplace, hold my light, and try to see up into the pitch blackness. Get this over with, Reggie. Propped on one elbow, I feel bricks, mortar, nothing like a hidden stash. A metal rod sticks out. I jiggle it.

Soot falls like a mine cave-in. It covers my hands and face, and I'm choking, sneezing. Eyes watering, I stagger to the kitchen sink, rinse out my mouth, go into the bathroom to the mirror. My blouse is filthy, face and hair covered with soot, hands grimy. Devaney's probably right: we all watch too much cop TV. But that's the problem. I'm playing a TV scene at the site of a very real murder. A script won't lead to the killer.

'Reggie, how goes it?' It's almost five. I've washed, changed, and cleaned the mess from the flue. Meg's here for showings. She's wearing a skirt with a plum jacket and the enamel earrings that

proclaim membership in the over-fifty women's Red Hat Society. "You okay, Reggie? Not too frazzled?"

"I gave the upstairs a quick search, Meg. Life would be simpler if I'd found a brick of cocaine in the toilet tank or raw diamonds in the chimney. Steven Damelin's death would mean a crime deal gone bad. Maybe I'd sleep at night. Maybe my days would be brighter."

"You'll feel better with a tenant. Vacancies are abnormal."

"Spoken like a Realtor, Meg."

"Like a friend. And a mother too. When Skip left for college, his room felt like a tomb. It still does. How're your kids?" But the doorbell rings. "Showtime, Reggie. Let's not dwell on what happened here. For every tenant, it's a clean slate." She catches my eye. "Clean slate for the landlady too."

In the next hour, Meg and I dispatch a hawk-faced guy who complains about low water pressure and an aromatherapist who smells like licorice. Number three is a banker who specializes in wills and trusts. Mackenzie Carruthers marches in stiletto heels, flashes a cold-front smile, announces the apartment "suits her needs" for a few months, and whips out an alligator checkbook. Meg suggests that they go to the realty office to finalize the sublet.

"Fine. Oh, I almost forgot—" The banker tweezes a small envelope from her bag and thrusts it into my hand. "To 'R.' Cutter."

"To me?" Is she drumming up clients?

"From a boy at the corner."

"What boy? She doesn't know him. 'Big'? A Latino?"

"No, he was wiry. A street-kid type in flip-flops. In this weather. I was climbing your steps, and he ran up."

"I don't know any boy." But the banker and Meg are off to sign a lease.

There's no address or stamp on this envelope. Back downstairs

I peer out my front window. Evening shadows fall, but Barlow Square is empty. There's no kid. I flick on a lamp and rip open the flap. Heavy expensive paper, and the note inside says:

I would like to talk with you about belongings of mine in your vacated apartment. You can reach me at 917-232-4082. My name is Alex.

Chapter Twenty-one

The dancer. I rush outside to look around. But no adult male is in sight on the square. Heart pounding, I scan the shadows and circle the block to look behind each tree and down every basement stairwell. There's nobody but a neighbor with a yoga mat. Back inside, I stare at the note. It's scary, but I'm being watched.

This time I call Maglia. This time he's decent and so eager for details that I realize Alex is one of the "specific individuals who Devaney reported are being sought. The cops," says Maglia, will send an unmarked van with electronic surveillance equipment to monitor my 911 call. For now, I'm to sit tight and wait for my cue, then invite Alex to visit Barlow Square. A sting.

But the furniture's moved into the basement. "Everything but the sofa."

"So invite Alex to the basement. A nice lady like you, Ms. Cutter, use your charm."

"Suppose he's suspicious."

He wants something from the apartment, he'll come."

"I already gave away a lamp."

Whatever he says that he wants, go along. We'll have you covered. We'll be there. You won't be alone for a minute.

That's the promise. Of course, I must trust it. If Alex is a suspect, he'll be in custody, not haunting Barrow Square with boy messengers. In short, a huge relief is in sight. Dinnertime comes, but I can't eat a bite. Biscuit needs a walk, but only to the corner and back. Maglia said to expect a couple of hours for clearance and the van setup. Two hours pass. Finally, 7:15 p.m., a dark van pulls up at the corner and I get Maglia's call. "We're all set, Ms. Cutter. You're on."

Fingers taut, I punch in (917) 232-4083. On the third ring a tenor hello. "Alex? This is Regina Cutter." "R. Cutter. I have your note." The phone connection is scratchy. "Hello?"

"I'm here."

"So about the apartment, Alex. Belongings of yours?"

"There's something of mine, and I'd like it back."

The apartment is empty. I deliberately omit Steven's name. "It's been cleaned and cleared out. What is it you're interested in? Is it furniture?"

"A photo wallet."

The phone connection fades, then surges. I hear traffic in the background. "Photos? I don't recall any photos."

"There's a blue enameled chest."

Indeed, taste is one of the most awkward and heavy pieces that Stark and I hauled down from atomic-era style. It's one floor down under my very feet.

"Ms. Cutter, the photos are keepsakes. They're personal. Suppose you tell me, where's the chest?"

Actually. "Take a deep breath, Reggie. Remember, the police van's here, and Maglia promises coverage. We have you

covered, we'll be there, you won't be alone. "The chest is here, Alex on Barlow Square. It's in my basement."

I hear his thick breathing. "How about . . . could you check it out?"

"Right now?"

"Just open the bottom drawer and feel up under. It's a pigskin wallet."

Anything to keep him on the line. Worst case: if there's no wallet, I'd lie and lure him here. Okay, here I go. I'm on the basement stairs. The dungeon of a basement and this playful furniture from the murder scene. Did Alex mark my door in blood?

Pulling out a drawer, I feel up and under. There's a lump. I tug it loose . . . yes, a small, dark leather folder. It was taped to the frame of the chest, which is why the search of the drawers didn't reveal it. "It's here."

Do I hear him grunt? The line crackles.

"You could stop by to pick it up. This evening?"

"No, that won't work."

"Or tomorrow morning?"

Silence. The line buzzes. "Ms. Cutter, are you going out tonight?"

"My plans are . . . uncertain."

"Because we could meet. You could drop it off."

Chills rise along my arms. A siren blares in the phone background. "What do you . . . have in mind?"

"There's a sandwich place, the Buttery."

It's a chain. "Which one?"

"On Franklin. Anytime this evening."

To leave my home, my shelter? Magda said nothing about this. Suppose there's a shoot-out, cross fire. I think of Nicole's

advice to get window bars. Can I call you back? Can you give me a few minutes?"

"That's not possible."

"Ten minutes?"

"Ms. Cutter, I'm on the move. My schedule's tight. No offense, I don't want to inconvenience you, but I have to know right now."

"Let me think." As if to think were possible. As if this is mere logistics. But Maglia's listening in, and a van full of cops too. *We'll be there, you won't be alone.* I could get this over with—clear the apartment, get rid of Alex.

Alex the killer?

"The Battery," I say at last, "on Franklin." We agree on 8:15.

It'll be dark but not the depths of the night. People will be out on the sidewalks and in the restaurants, which is important. The transaction shouldn't take more than a minute. Then I'll move out as the cops move in.

Do I know the way to the Battery? Maglia rings to ask and to congratulate me on "handling" the phone situation. He'll have me followed. A police detail will be on-site, though somehow "detail" is not reassuring. How about squad? Battalion?

Franklin Avenue is a narrow roadway near the Sears Crescent. Several unmarked cars have followed my Beetle, each one I'm assuming to be the police. Since cops are all around, I surely can park in an after-hours loading zone. So I do, then walk fast to the Battery, a luncheonette with its signature neon butter churn logo and pale yellow walls. Doubtless bustling at midday, it's bleak in the darkness, the only sound the slap of a mop on the tile floor and the slurp of straws sucking the last of a chocolate frappe that a couple in corduroys is sharing at a corner table. A gray-bearded man hunches over a magazine on model railroading. He nurses a black coffee. Surely not Alex. It's 8:04.

I order a hot chocolate and sit at the table closest to the door. Outside, a man in a hooded sweatshirt lounges against a light pole. A stocky woman with upswept hair chats with a curbside taxi driver. Both undercover cops, I'm sure of it.

Minutes crawl. A tourist family comes in for burgers but settles for tuna salad because the grill is off. It's 8:09. No Alex. The taxi driver comes in for a travel mug refill and I make eye contact to signal that I know he's a cop.

Eight-seven p.m. and I try to appear calm. The passport photo wallet is in my bag in easy reach. The frappe cools. I sip my hot chocolate. Then the door opens. It's a wiry teen in jeans, tap-tips, and a thick of dark hair across a high forehead. He scans the room, stops at my table. A panhandler?

"You looking for somebody?" His eyes are impatient. "You have some pictures?"

"Alex?"

"He'll meet you."

"Here. He's coming here."

"You R. Cutter?"

Then I know: this is the messenger.

"You're supposed to come with me. We're not half an hour. Come on."

Where? A dark alleyway? No, no more of this. Enough is enough. I start to say so. But here's the catch. Alex won't free. His sting will fail. It'll be my fault for stopping halfway.

Suppose I go along—to a point. I'll refuse to enter alleys or climb stairways. And I'm sure we'll keep me in sight every second. Magda promised. Outside, the police orbs: a bike and woman with upswept hair gaining this way. Taxis and police vehicles everywhere. They'll radio ahead. Relays of cops will track my every move. I grab my bag and rise. Okay.

I'm Cutter Street check-in-ness at a fast clip, the [illegible]

his flip-flops a constant on Court Square, around Old City Hall, now School Street. I'm a half-step behind up and down each block. Cars pass, vans, a truck, each one of them pure reassurance, law enforcement at work. I'm slightly breathless. There's no chitchat. This kid's all business, doubtless paid to deliver me on time.

But where? This is the part of Boston where city government meets the tourist route, the Old Granary Burying Ground, the Parker House.

That's where he halts, in front of the Parker House. The driver of a curbside Town Car opens the back door. Am I to enter? No. I won't do it. The doorman smiles. A bellman pushes a luggage cart. Are they conspiring with the kid? With Alex? Are they cops?

No, they're helping arriving hotel guests, an elderly couple with suitcases.

The kid checks his watch. "Made it."

"Made what?"

"Inside. He's at the bar. He's waiting."

The Parker House bar? I turn to face the entranceway. "Parker's Bar?" But when I turn back, the kid is gone.

Take a breath, Reggie. A landmark public place, of course I'll go inside. Strange as it sounds that Alex wants his photo wallet delivered here. To help the police, however. I stroll to the corner of Tremont and School streets and pose for several minutes rooting in my bag, a woman searching her purse for keys, a phone, a lipstick. Traffic passes, and here on the sidewalk come two young men with short hair and a broad-shouldered woman in a trim navy suit. Undercover cops? Highly probable. Also likely a nutty ponytailed man in a sport coat who enters the hotel. At last, a uniformed officer on foot passes and says, "Evening." That has got to be my cue to proceed.

The lobby is hushed and bustling at once. The dark grooved paneling, coffered ceiling, sconces, thick carpeting—all are familiar though it's been years since I was here. Parker's Bar is toward the rear, its stained-glass windowpanes dull in this nighttime hour. Who's in the bar? Business types in suits, a young couple, a threesome drinking chocolate martinis. Also the ponytailed man, my undercover cop—good.

Then I spot him, a dark-haired figure in black jeans and T-shirt and a tight jacket the color of honey. His compact body is all muscle, and his hair looks wet and spiked. He's seated at the end of a roll-arm sofa near the glowing fireplace. His eyes dart left and right. He's cleaning his nails with a small blade.

"Alex?"

"Ms. Cutter? Have a seat."

I take the chair at a right angle to the sofa. Mineral water fizzes on the table at his elbow. His voice is just above a gravel whisper. "Yes, I'm Alex."

I have the pigskin wallet." I reach toward my bag.

He stops me. The blade flashes. "Do you know who I am?"

"You're Steven Damelin's friend."

"That's all you know?"

"It's enough. About the wallet—"

The server comes. I order water. It arrives. The ponytail man sits twenty feet away facing Alex and looks at his watch. Is this a signal to me? To a police partner?

"No, Steven's friend isn't enough. Steve and I were together. Almost five years together."

Then it's certain: lovers.

"I didn't kill him." His Adam's apple bobs. The tip of the blade reams the underside of his left thumbnail. "We had a huge fight in Chelmsley's. The whole dining room heard us. And something else. I was upstairs on Tuesday night.

'That Tuesday.' In Steven's apartment on the murder night. My bloody door. Why does he tell me this? Ponytail man stands and strolls out while opening a package of cigarettes. A police signal? I'm ready to toss the wallet and run.

Then I realize maybe we're not only watched but being recorded, even videotaped. Devices are microscopic. Maybe Maglia wants me to play this out. The blade isn't a nail clipper but a pocketknife. "So you were in Steven's apartment the night he was killed." He nods. I say, "The police have spoken quite a lot to me."

"You're not their prime suspect. It's not your ass they're after."

"Shall we get to the business at hand?" I pluck out the wallet, which is streaked with adhesive from the tape. Deliberately I hold it high for the cops to see, to record.

He asks, "Did you look inside?"

"Should I? Are the photos like that Mapplethorpe art exhibit—naked men?" I start to hand it toward him, and Alex reaches for the wallet. But no law enforcement officer steps forward, no plainclothes, no uniform. At this moment, something in my mind creases, fractures. Everyone in the bar—I suppose they're just patrons, guests. The ponytail man, suppose he simply stepped outside for a smoke.

Suppose the police detail didn't make it to the Battery before the kid showed up.

On my own. This means I'm on my own with a former lover of my murdered tenant. A suspect. Maybe the killer. A man with a knife. In this split second, he grabs for the wallet, and I pluck it back. "How do I know this is yours?" His eyes darken. "How do I know you're Alex? Alex who?"

"What the f—?" That gravel voice.

"You think I'd come here without an escort?"

"You brought cops?"

"Let's say private security." I can guess what he's thinking. "If you grab at the wallet, Alex, I'll scream my head off. You won't get past the doorman."

"What is it you want?"

"Start with your last name."

"Ribideau. *R-i-b-i-d-e-a-u.*"

"Can you prove it?"

He digs in his jeans back pocket and flashes a photo ID from the Jeremiah Steele Dance Company. "You could get work as an airport screener, Ms. Cutter."

"And if you didn't kill Steven," I say, "who did?"

"What's it to you?"

Eyeing the knife, I lean his way. "Because I'm the one who scrubbed his blood off my floor."

He blinks. From pain? Or guilt? It's that high school kid.

"Who's named—?"

"Diaz. Luis Diaz. I warned Steve. He wouldn't listen. He got obsessed with that kid." Alex sucks at his cheek. "Or maybe it was somebody from that bucket shop."

"What bucket—?"

"Corsair, bunch of crooks. Ask Matt, he'll tell you."

"Matthew Kitchel? At the Apollo Club?"

Or maybe some pickup date from modeling.

"Steven modeled? For an agency?"

"In a damn department store window. Downtown Crossing on Valentine's Day, he was Cupid. Last year he was Tarzan. Modeling gigs in store windows, every psycho in the city can get after you. Steve wouldn't listen. We fought about it. Among other things. But he fixated on that kid, that lumberjoser." He spits the accusation. Is Alex jealous? He snaps the knife closed, then open. "I gotta go. How about my wallet?" He stands, looms over me. "If you think it's evidence, you're wrong. How about this hand

lady? How about give me the wallet and one minute to get out the door before you make your frigging fuss? Sixty seconds, what do you say? My wallet and a minute's time before they chase me down? Blood sport, how about it?"

The blade glints between his right thumb and forefinger. He's about to lunge. I can feel it. I see it in the coil of his right shoulder, the torque of his hips. With my heels planted in the carpet, I knot both thighs and push off with everything I've got. Please, let this chair be on casters. Yes, the chair gives, rolls back as I feel his breath close to my skin and he reaches to yank the wallet from my fist.

In that second, I twist sideways in the chair, and it's so fast I don't at first see the little Swiss Army blade plunge and stick. Alex vanishes, but the chair is stabbed like a pincushion at the level of my neck. I pull the blade out, close it, squeeze the knife tight, and here comes that feeling again. In the Parker House bar, the shapes begin to form, the log to float in rolling water. And Steven begins to thrash as that twist runs the length of my body from my feet up into my shoulders. The knife, it's cut an opening, a passage to the mind game I have to play to win with everything I've got.

Chapter Twenty-two

Where were you? Where the hell were you? The voice from outside my front doorstep is pure tight rage. I've just parked and hurried down the walk on Barrow Square. "Where the hell did you go?"

To get my car, Detective Maglia. At a loading zone. No thanks to you."

No games, Ms. Cutter, please. no games with me. He steps my way in the darkness, his face hard as marble in the streetlight. It's nearly ten. He's been waiting for me. A dozen officers were staked out up and down Franklin—they waited till the Buttery shut its doors at nine—"

We're nose-to-nose on my sidewalk. I was there.

From Pearl to Arch we had Franklin Street covered.

Street? But I was on Franklin at *Vreeland*. Mr. Maglia, I was at the Buttery that's on Franklin Avenue."

He's curse is low and short. *Vreeland*. Christ, I owe Duffy a case of—okay, okay—we thought—we called in the blues

Sergeant Dutty remembered . Anyway, when our people got there, nobody was inside but an old guy with a railroad magazine. Now, what's your story?"

So I tell him the whole thing.

"You decided the cabdriver across the street was an undercover cop, so you left the Buttery and followed the kid? Is that it?"

And a man with a ponytail. And a few others too. Check your messages, you'll hear me from the Parker House the second Alex Rabideau grabbed the wallet and raced outside. There was no police officer out front of the hotel. The doorman was busy.

"But you think the guy tried to stab you?"

"Or to scare me. Here's the knife, it's in my bag . see." I hold the bag open.

Handkerchief open, he plunges in with a big flourish and grabs it. "Probably useless. You messed up the prints."

Mr. Maglia, the blade punctured the upholstery of the chair I sat in. I pulled it out. I didn't think about a police lab at the time. I had self-defense in mind."

Skip the dramatics, Ms. Cutter. That's the problem with a civilian."

Civilian' is a double slur on 'amateur' and 'psychic.' A surge of hot fury fills my chest, my temples. Reggie, keep your head. Let Maglia vent. Do not embarrass or blame him for tonight's royal screwup. A killer is loose. You need the police.

"So a murder upstairs, blood on your door, extra patrols for your block here. And now this: you turn over the wallet and he escapes. Where's the learning curve, Ms. Cutter? Tell me, where's the curve?"

I slump a little, play the hangdog.

"Tell me about the pictures in the wallet."

"I didn't look at them."

"I'm supposed to believe that? Try again."

"It's true. I thought it'd be tampering."

'Tampering with evidence? Isn't the knife evidence? Where's the common sense, Ms. Cutter? On vacation? At the beach?" Seconds crawl.

'Can you trace his phone?" I'm trying to be helpful. "The 917 number, did your electronic surveillance equipment—?"

'The phone's stolen. It belongs to a college student in Brooklyn, New York."

I keep quiet so he doesn't feel needled. I am wrecked.

'Let's use our heads on this, Ms. Cutter. Ribideau shows up again, you call me right away. Not a minute later. Immediately. You understand?"

He slams into an SUV. I expect a burst of speed, but his engine idles while I dig out my key and go inside. Even then he lingers, ten, twenty minutes. From the window I check. An hour later, he's finally gone.

The next morning, 10:30 a.m., I'm in StyleSmart sorting jackets. After Maglia left last night, I went straight to the basement, felt under every drawer of the blue chest—and got one ferocious splinter in my thumb. Period.

I'm now in the countdown to today's lunch with Knox Baker. Weeks ago, a budding romance shimmered in my future. Now it's more like a mirage. A murder changes everything. Already my rose cashmere blend is wrinkled, and I don't really care. I'm desperate to ask Nicole whether Jo ever spoke of Alex Ribideau or knows anything about Steven's modeling, but we've been too busy with customers. Still nothing from sculptor Tom Chou about the blood marks on my door.

Nicole calls to the fitting room. "How're you doin' in there, Ms. Jackson?"

"Fine. Just fine."

'You take your time.' She turns to me. 'What a morning.'

Nicole, when the store empties out, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Here's one for you, Reggie: are you still holding out against window bars?"

I reply that my Biscuit is a first-rate watchdog.

"What's that beagle weigh, about twenty pounds?"

"Twenty pounds of dynamite." Nicole rolls her eyes, and we continue sorting cow-pattern jackets, relics of a bygone fashion fad.

"Bless their hearts, they think they're doing us a big favor, sending this old stuff. Let's count 'em up, send 'em to the Salvation Army."

From the fitting room comes a grunt. Ms. Jackson is trying on a suit at least two sizes too small, but Nicole smiles like Mother Teresa. If she'd hustle the woman out, I could ask about Alex. And about Steven and Jo. Will she think harder about their deal if I describe the blood marks on my door—or will she only nag about welded window bars?

More grunts from the dressing room, which is off-limits unless we're invited in, a StyleSmart rule. I tried to guide Marva Jackson to the new big-size boutique. No luck. She's been in the fitting room for over half an hour. I'm timing her. My guess: a stuck zipper.

At last, Nicole pipes up. "Ms. J., can we help you out?"

The store is silent, then comes a whimper, then a muffled gasp. Nicole marches into the fitting room with a pair of shears. I hear moans, murmurs, and the sound of scissors cutting cloth. Then, "Don't you worry, Ms. J., we all of us make a size mistake from time to time. No, you don't owe us a thing, not one thing." In minutes, Marva Jackson flees a customer cut free of a suit into which she shrink-wrapped herself and couldn't budge.

"It happens now and then, Reggie. Pride goeth before the scissors."

I smile, then ask, did Jo ever mention Alex Ribideau? Nicole shakes her head. Definitely not. Or a male dancer, any dancer. No. She's quite sure. "How about pineapple?"

"The fruit?"

"A connection between pineapple and Chinese?"

She shrugs. "Sweet-and-sour?"

"About Steven, Nicole — the part about Jo's ship coming in? Did she use those actual words?"

"Sure. It's just a figure of speech, Reggie."

"Did she say anything else? Anything about a business named Corsair Financial? Anything?"

"No, nothing like that. Nothing concrete." She pauses. "I do remember she said something about a helping hand."

"A helping hand?" The heart sinks at the cliché.

"Like he was gonna give her a helping hand, or maybe she gave him a helping hand. Something like that."

A helping hand, a ship coming in — what's next, a lucky day, the sun will shine, and the cow jumped over the moon? "I'll finish the cows."

"You have a lunch date today, don't you, Reggie? Why not leave a few minutes early, take your time, lower the stress? And the candy-pink chiffon scarf on the accessories table — try it with your rose linen. Tie it loose and low, see what you think. And have yourself a real good time. Unwind. Enjoy yourself."

Enjoy myself? Maybe, maybe not. The scarf, I admit, looks terrific. Nicole's a fashion fairy godmother, but it's Alex Ribideau and Steven's body on my mind when I reach the cafe on Newbury and ask for Mr. Baker's table.

It's high noon, and suddenly I'm standing face-to-face with the man who's rising to greet me — in his later forties, with

quick, deep brown eyes, high cheekbones, short salt-and pepper hair with a little front wave. He's wearing charcoal slacks, a sage polo shirt, and loafers. A certain feeling of quiet intensity comes back to me, and he's taller than I'd remembered.

"Knox?"

"Regina . . . Reggie."

One quick air kiss, and we soon sit over a white burgundy and warm seafood plates. From reflex, I scan the scene for Alex Ribideau in case he's here for lunch. It's a long shot but not impossible. You never know. I've enjoyed your cards, Knox," I say. "Sphinx and pyramids."

"With that phony postcard blue sky." We chuckle.

"So you've been to Egypt and Kuwait."

"And Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. Have you been to the Middle East? No?"

It's my cue to ask him what it's like there, hold up my end of the conversation. "You go often on business?" He nods. "It sounds intriguing."

"I've been all over the world. There's no place more interesting."

As for interesting, I'd bet on Knox Baker. If I could. If I weren't bound to a murder case. Two cops walk by outside on Newbury. Were they on the Franklin detail last night?

Knox's hand brushes mine as he raises his glass. "Here's to the day. Tell me, Reggie, how are you?"

"Fine. I'm fine." Our lunches are barely touched.

"I really want to know."

What can I say? To tell of Steven's death, the police, my vision, Alex . . . I can't even begin. "I have some things on my mind."

"I thought so. I sense it." He swirls his wine. "Reggie, it's brutal to drop in and out this way, but I wanted to see you." He

looks into my eyes. "The postcards, they're meant to say that you're on my mind."

It's an overture. And flattering. And also my cue to reciprocate. My romantic future—is it here across this table? Maybe in the next months or year, but not at the moment—not when Steven's death fills my days and nights. Knox Baker—any number of women would flock to his table, his arms, his bed. And yes, if my mind and spirit were free, I'd imagine running my fingers through this man's hair. Or let myself think of the strong, tanned arms. Or look into his eyes and feel the yearning that spans years and wakens something I have thought to be gone forever.

Yet the force field that holds me in its grip for now is homicide.

Knox taps the crystal of his watch. "Someday I'll be back here for good. Right now my schedule isn't my own. That's all I can say for now. Will you—will you hold a space for me? Will you try?"

I try to hear him. Is it a request? A challenge? An invitation? My pulse is up, but I can't pretend it's for Knox. Not now. The pull is strong, but the drive to find Steven's killer dictates everything. A moment passes. I murmur yes, that I'll try, but the warmth that fills my body is the fevered urge to solve this murder.

Chapter Twenty-three

Call it the afterglow or an aftertaste. Every block that I drive from the Newbury lunch to Barlow Square forces me to the fact that I'm revved but stymied. Alex's accusations spew from Luis to Corsair to Steven's street pickup dates. Should I revisit the Apollo Club for another round with surly Matt? And what did Luis mean when he asked about a movie or video from Steven's things? Focused on giving him the Lava lamp, I wasn't nimble. Suppose Stark and I go back to Jamaica Plain. Suppose, suppose, suppose.

Brooding? Am I thinking or brooding? I take Biscuit for a short walk, straighten up the kitchen, iron a blouse for a mindless moment, and get the telephone call I'd schemed for. It's Leonard Vogler of Corsair Financial.

He doesn't waste a word. My Margaret, Mrs. Vogler—would much appreciate your offer to meet with her regarding a memorial service for Steven. Ms. Carter. Would tomorrow after-

noon be possible? It's that speakerphone voice again. Corsair could send a car."

Mr. Vogler, I have a car. I might be able to rearrange my schedule. Yes, it's just possible at three o'clock. This gambit is from my ex, Marty, always insisting on the impression of a full schedule. Leonard Vogler puts his assistant on with directions to Crownfinshed Farms.

The next day, Friday, is drizzling and gray as I pass the North Shore I-95 exits, reaching Crownfinshed Farms just before 3:00 p.m. This will be lady-to-lady, so I'm in a slate skirt, silk shirt, and sienna Brioni Escorial jacket with pearls.

The gatehouse attendant gives me the once-over and points me into a sand vision that feels like a time warp of my former life. Any one of these McMansions could have been ours. They're gabled brick and half-timber with cedar shingle accents, Palladian windows and chimney stacks, and multivehicle garages. Dignified entrance gates, beveled glass, super landscaping. Did the developer lower the banister rails an inch or two so the man of the house feels just a little taller? Ours did.

At an S curve, the subdivision suddenly ends. Now I'm in a corridor of dense dark evergreens, no house in sight. The gatehouse attendant said nothing about this. I clock the distance: five-, six tenths of a mile. The road narrows so that two vehicles can barely pass. I'm alone on the road, and it feels like a one way to the center of the earth.

Finally a clearing. A long rutted front drive leads left toward patchy brown fields and a house set back against a ridge, as if pushed there, an outpost. I count five chimneys. There's a barn and some sheds.

Pulling over, I verify the number, 11. Two strips of reflector tape make a crude V on a corroded mailbox here at the roadside.

Jostled at the ruts, I approach a brick house and outbuildings

that loom in a gray mist. I'm looking at sagging shutters, a collapsing barn, fallen fencing, and a huge greenhouse whose panes are mostly smashed like so many blinded eyes.

Surely a mistake, this can't be the Voglers' home. Just as the Damelin house couldn't be Steven's. Not one window shines against this gunmetal-gray sky. Except for a car parked in the front, the place looks abandoned, like one big *Keep Out*. Why is the Voglers' home such a wreck? A financial pinch at Corsair? A family reversal of some sort? Lean times needn't call for extreme dilapidation. It's as if they're flaunting a New England ruin.

And nobody knows I'm here. No one at all. The nape of my neck prickles in the dampness. Don't be silly, I tell myself. Don't overreact. Yet I'm wishing for a tracking device.

Be logical, Reggie. It's a drab day in a rainy autumn. Inside is a woman who is "not well." But goosefl esh from gloom? No. It's something else I feel—dread. I can't imagine Steven here in this house any more than I can picture him on Croker Street in Lawrence. Parked, I'm staring at a big rusted piece of farm equipment with teeth and claws.

One thing's certain: there is no body of water visible at this North Shore location, neither a swimming pool nor creek nor even a fishpond. The route to the Vogler property has stopped two miles short of the seacoast. The North Shore that promised a link to my vision of Steven drowning is a dead end. The dull brass knocker thuds on a heavy door. The house smells like mold, and the brick is the color of flesh.

"Miss Cutter?"

"Yes." In the opened door stands a stocky woman with bobbed hair and stony eyes. A beeper is clipped to her apron strap. "I'm Alma. I'm the housekeeper. Mrs. Vogler is in the sun parlor. This way."

She leads me through a living room of Queen Anne and Chip-

pendale sofas, chairs case clock, secretary. To my eye, all authentic.

In a room off to the left, I glimpse ranks of wall-mounted rifles, pistols, and sailing ship paintings But I m focused on the tabletops that hold clustered family photos There s a dark haired boy and blond girl who must be Andrew and Dani Vogler as children Also a man in tweeds Leonard Vogler And a smiling blond woman on a boat deck Surely Margaret I d love ten minutes alone to study each face and to look for photos of Steven, especially photos of boyhood horse shows But Alma marches me briskly over a threadbare Sarouk The rooms smell of dead roses

'Ms Cutter, so good of you to come I m Margaret Vogler '

In a glassed in porch, a bone-thin woman in a mango print jersey dress with a halter top rises slowly in open-toe sandals with spike heels It makes me chilly just to look at her She extends a hand flashing with rings Sparkle combs hold back platinum-streaked hair, which frames a full featured face, a wide mouth, and a fawn complexion Her fingers tremble as she grips a cane for support Her smile is wan her soft gray green eyes hollowed Meant to be cling sexy, the mango jersey hangs on her frame, and the exposed skin of her bare shoulders is grayish in this light The fawn complexion seems a triumph of makeup

'Will you have tea' Alma, hot tea if you will

It takes a moment to realize this woman can t be much over thirty-five Her affliction has added years, a decade By my count, she's barely older than Steven and can t possibly be the Mrs Vogler described by Crystal The woman before me is no question, a new Mrs. Vogler.

In moments, we re on first-name basis Margaret hopes the traffic wasn t too hideous We agree the season has been unusually wet, the autumn leaves less spectacular than usual I speak slowly so as not to tax the strength of an invalid

Alma sets a tea tray on a table at Margaret's side and disappears. The cups are Belleek porcelain with cheerful shamrocks and the pouring takes considerable effort. The silver—old and heavy, monogrammed not with a V but a C—is tarnished. Does this woman have MS? Parkinson's? Was it a stroke?

Is she the smiling blonde on the boat deck in the family photos? There's no equestrian memorabilia in sight, and that shambles of a barn surely isn't a stable. The head of her cane is carved into a grinning leprechaun with ruby eyes. What happened to Vogler's first wife?

"Leonard tells me that you've offered to help us with the memorial service for Steven." Her voice is husky.

That's right. Rev. Gail Welch of All Souls Church in Boston's South End offers to officiate. Her church administers the Big Buddies mentor program in which Steven has helped a Dominican boy named Luis Diaz. Perhaps he talked about the program? Or Luis?"

"Luis? I'm afraid not."

"Steven also knew and admired my late aunt, Josephine Cutter. Perhaps he mentioned her name?"

She murmurs, "So many names."

"Or Jo? She went by 'Jo.'"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps my husband . . ."

"Of course. We sip our tea. I myself met Steven just before he . . . late last month. He sublet my upstairs flat and showed great kindness. He rushed to help me when I fell."

"Oh, that's Steven through and through."

I understand he was like a member of the Vogler family.

Oh yes, he was a brother to Andrew—Drew. And to Dani—that's short for Danielle. They all loved horses, and they all rode as children. My husband deserves great credit for rescuing Steven, sponsoring his education."

'How fortunate for a boy, for a young man."

'Absolutely. Steven himself told me that he was so puny as a boy that he wore Dani's boots. They say he started riding Brownie, the gentlest horse. Within two seasons, he was on an Arabian named Hurricane."

She looks at me as if reciting this history lifts her beyond her own come-lately entry into the family. "You see, Regina, the Vogler family had certain future plans that went beyond the boys' friendship. My husband's business, at first he thought –"

But she breaks off and reaches for her teacup. "My husband consoles himself that Steven's life, though cut short, was fuller. His birth parents . . . well, the father drives a taxi. I believe they live in Lawrence, and you know those depressed New England mill towns. I understand the family grew apart. You do like Irish Breakfast?"

"It's a favorite."

I grew up on it. I'm half Irish on my father's side. She looks me in the eye. The fact is, Regina, when the heart's broken, the mind flies into pieces. My mind is a thousand pieces.

Because of Steven's death? Or her illness? Both? The leprechaun grins. The case clock strikes three, though it's almost four. Margaret Vogler takes no outward notice. On the stiff wicker sunporch furniture, she flouts comfort. Maybe she fights her disability this way. Maybe the open-toe high heels and clingy jersey dress defy the season, the losing battle with her body, and even the dilapidated homesite. Her acknowledgment of the Damelins only seems to erase them.

Do have one of these crisps. Alma's sister sent them over.

The ginger water jams the roof of my mouth like cardboard. I murmur how tasty, work the cookie loose, and manage to swallow as Margaret says, Regina, it's so important to have photographs at a memorial service. I'm sure you'd like to have a

selection from the framed ones in our front room. There are two or three of Steven."

Good, here's the topic of family photos. Run with this, Reggie. Get the family history. Strategize. Candids are also nice, I say. They're not so formal. They help to celebrate the life. Perhaps there are family albums we might see?"

"Oh, the albums." Her face clouds. I hadn't thought about the albums. They're not really necessary, though, are they?" She brushes her fingers as if in dismissal. Clearly the albums aren't part of the afternoon plan. Anyway, we recently did some rearranging. Everything's topsy-turvy. These days I can't find a thing."

Is she flighty or evasive? Is the second wife dodging the pictorial memory lane of her husband's past? If so, it's understandable. But this is my one chance for deep background. I must push. Margaret, I surely know that upside-down feeling. But sometimes things turn up where you'd least expect them."

"Nothing is in its place. The steak knives, the albums. It's a bit comic, actually."

"I'm sorry to hear that. . . because guests at a memorial service so appreciate the pictorial biography. There's no substitute for family albums."

But we can't rummage through the house, can we? I'm afraid for now the framed photos will fill the bill.

I nod to show agreement. Think faster, Reggie. Plan. I ask for another cookie. "So delicious," I say brightly. "I wonder, does your Alma have her sister's recipe? Would it be too much trouble to ask?"

Not at all. I manage to swallow the doughy wad as Margaret beeps her housekeeper. Alma reappears. "Alma, Ms. Cutter is interested in Liesl's recipe for the ginger crisps."

"Fantastic," I say. "The texture is amazing."

'That's your gluten flour,' says Alma. 'You want to use a gluten flour and hot oven, not too much shortening. My sister doesn't measure anything. She doesn't have to."

Well, I'll remember that. I give Alma my warmest smile. 'And while you're here, Alma, Mrs. Vogler was just saying how confusing new household arrangements are. We were regretting that the family albums are temporarily out of place. I don't suppose you know where they are?"

Oh, did you want them? They're in the great room on the second shelf. Should I bring them in, Mrs. Vogler?

Cornered. Margaret looks cornered. "That would be fine, Alma." She gives me a resigned smile. 'If it weren't for Alma . . .'

A treasure.' The housekeeper disappears and returns with an armful of leather-bound albums. I quickly pull my chair around for the scrutiny I'd hoped for. In forced togetherness, Margaret and I gaze at color shots of children on horseback, on ski slopes, in a pool. So far, there's no sign of the first Mrs. Vogler. 'That's Dan. She talks about that red bathing suit to this day. The blond child beams, waist-high at the shallow end.

And there's Drew somersaulting from the diving board at the club.' I lean closer to see a boy with short dark hair, arms and legs tucked into a ball in midair, the image blurry. We move to the second album, and Margaret flicks the page.

There's little Steven, one of the family's first pictures of him. Next up on the diving board, face unmistakable. Steven clowns with a beach ball, his expression apprehensive. He must be ten or eleven, but extremely small for his age. In the next picture, the boys play tug of war with the same ball, both laughing, though the larger Andrew seems to be wresting the ball away.

Margaret turns the pages as if eager to get this over with short of rudeness. The years fast-forward, but the pattern stays the same. Danielle is at the margins, seldom with the boys. She ap-

pears in a choir robe and sings at a piano. She sits at an arts and crafts table while hand-lettering the family's holiday cards. Dani looks delicate, though the field hockey stick and tennis racket proclaim her as active in sports. In several photos, she poses with the tall, loose-limbed man with sandy tousled hair and a bright red neckerchief—Vogler. Everybody's in court whites.

The boys, however, seem inseparable. Steven and Andrew brush horses, soap saddles, ride in fenced rings in horse shows. They ski, roast hot dogs, bicycle, pass footballs, escort corsaged young women in tulle and satin prom gowns. Steven gains weight, reaches full size beside Andrew. Her diamonds flash as Margaret turns the page to show the two young men posing in college graduation robes. Arms around one another's shoulders, laughing, they could be brothers, even fraternal twins. I can see that Andrew Vogler, like Steven, is dark but finer-featured, his eyes deeper set, mouth narrower.

"Isn't that Danielle on Steven's arm? Was she his date?

"That, I believe, was a college formal."

Does Margaret know Steven was gay? Do the Voglers? At that time, did he? Each and every album page turned by Margaret's tremulous fingers, however, raises the question too obvious to ask aloud: where is the first Mrs. Vogler, the mother of Drew and Dani? The younger second wife is the chronicler of a family history in which she plays no part. Looking closely at the photos, I now see scissored borders, cropped edges. The albums have been purged. The first Mrs. Vogler is gone. From death? Divorce?

Andrew is a handsome man, I say, "just as Steven was. Why they both look good enough to be male models."

She gives a noncommittal smile. My model prompt goes nowhere. Few of the photographs show Steven alone, so I choose several that include Andrew. For the memorial service, I promise

good care. "And so Steven visited regularly here—up until the end—is that right?"

She closes the last album. "Leonard and I were perfectly willing to make space available for Steven's skis and paraphernalia, just as we do for Drew and Dani. Our home is scheduled for major renovation. In the meantime, we protect their things with waterproof tarpaulins. The Vogler front door has been thrown wide-open."

Translation: Lately Steven drove up to this Crowninshed Farms near ruin to get his stored stuff. Lately Margaret became the superintendent of a storage locker. Which means it's unlikely that she or her husband knows of the deal between Steven and Jo.

Perhaps you know Steven's longtime friend Alex Ribideau?

She seems surprised to hear me say Alex's name. "Yes, of course. Of course I do." Her eyelids flutter. "He's a dancer. I, too, was a dancer."

"Oh?" I try to conceal my shock.

"It was some time ago. But those of us in the performing arts are kindred spirits. We share a deep bond." She pauses, twists a diamond band, touches her throat, and says, "To help the police, my husband searched our records of contributions to the arts."

"To the Jeremiah Steele Dance Company?"

"Precisely." She clasps her cup, her fingers tight. The tawny complexion reddens.

As of this morning, I say, the police couldn't find Alex. Right now he's dancing faster than they are. A smile breaks through. How much does she know about Steven's former lover? How deep is that dancer-to-dancer bond? When Alex asked for a memento of his time with Steven, Margaret, I couldn't say no. "I met him at the Parker House."

"You saw him?"

We had a drink together. He's devastated.

Oh, poor Alex." She looks at the sun parlor doorway as if Alma might lurk. We're seated so close together our knees nearly touch. There's a faint medicinal odor that seeps through Margaret's dress, her very pores. "I'll tell you this," she says. "Alex and I have also spoken, days ago. He was frantic. He ought to be with us, planning the service." Her cup rattles as she puts it down. "If only I could help. You see —she meets my gaze— I introduced them."

"Introduced Steven to Alex?"

She pauses, her eyes locked on mine, and says, "Alex to Steven."

"Oh, I see." It takes everything to nod calmly and set down the Belleek cup and saucer with the bright shamrocks. So this is why Margaret Vogler's mind has flown into a thousand pieces: it's about Alex Ribideau. It's Alex whom she's upset about, not Steven. Steven Damelin, I realize, is secondary. His death means crisis for Alex, even if Alex is the killer. As the case clock chimes again, I realize that another hour has come and gone, and neither Margaret nor I have once spoken the word "murder."

Chapter Twenty-four

Tires crunch outdoors, and footsteps approach the sun parlor. "Margaret, my dear—and you must be Ms. Cutter. I'm Leonard Vogler."

His sandy hair has receded, but I recognize the red neckerchief man in the tennis photos. He is ruddy complexioned, about six feet, with watery blue eyes. His club tie is loosened and crooked, and his pinstripe suit padded. He shakes hands with a little twist, as if for a backhand shot. His bright yellow suspenders are patterned with chickens wearing spurs—no, they're fighting cocks.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Vogler."

"Make it Leonard." From my shoe tops up, he surveys each item of my clothing and my pearls.

Margaret has unclipped her hair, which falls loose to her shoulders. "What can we get you, dear?"

"I'll grab a bourbon. Join me, Ms. Cutter?"

"It's Regina, please. And no, thank you. I know better than

to defect from ladies' tea. In moments, drink in hand, he jams his body into a wicker chair and swirls the ice in a hefty slug of whiskey. "Dreary day. Lousy fall. His ice rattles so hard two cubes fly out. Fumbling, he drops them into a decorative Ming bowl. "Margaret and I were scheduled for Sea Island this month. Had to cancel."

So Margaret is not too housebound to travel. "Coastal Georgia," I say, "is lovely at this time of year. But I'm afraid we've made only modest progress in planning Steven's memorial service. We've selected some photographs. Mostly we've been talking informally."

"It's my fault," Margaret says. She blinks rapidly. Or is she batting her eyes at her husband?

"My late aunt had a connection with All Souls Church," I say, "and I'm acquainted with the minister there—unless Steven had an affiliation elsewhere?"

"Steven didn't." Now Margaret's eyes are fixed on Leonard's face. "Steven was uncertain about his spiritual path." The two exchange glances.

"I'll get in touch with All Souls. But I'll need a list of Steven's coworkers."

"No problem." Vogler snaps a suspender. Spurs flash, the cocks bulge and shrink. "We can circulate the announcement."

"And will your family take part—your son Andrew? Your daughter?"

"Drew, yes. I'll have him contact you. Dani's singing. My daughter has had extensive voice training."

"Very nice," I say. "And Steven's friends outside of work? How can I reach them?"

"That's more complicated." Suddenly both Voglers look ill at ease, though perhaps for different reasons. Margaret is doubtless thinking of Alex Ribideau. Vogler? Who knows?

Perhaps Andrew and Danielle could help us," I say

'Steven's new friends in recent years, says Margaret, "we wouldn't know them I doubt Dani or Drew do

Vogler drinks To be blunt, Steven had friends in the gay community."

The family loved him all the same,' says Margaret Leonard frowns She rolls her shoulders and peers from the sunporch windows into the darkening gray She says, We are equal in God's eyes."

Discrimination is illegal,' says Vogler I couldn't be a bigot and run a business, not these days."

So Leonard Vogler dislikes his protegé "son" being gay And he's probably unaware that his wife introduced him to his longtime partner.

We are open minded says Margaret My husband did the right thing for Steven no matter what."

Margaret my dear, here's the right thing Dani's found a glass man to work on the greenhouse Forgive this Regina, but my wife needs a ray of sunshine You see, we've plunged into a new phase of life Last March we moved lock, stock, and barrel into this historic Crowninshed estate without a minute's hesitation because we saw the possibilities We decided country living was just the ticket for good health Isn't that right, dear? Margaret manages a wan smile "You said it so cleverly, my dear Your turn of phrase about the house, what was it?"

'Good bones, says Margaret dutifully I said the house has good bones."

Right, but the whole property cried out for restoration Why we're practically homesteaders I'm a western boy, you see I'm from Nevada But Margaret's old family home here is our latest project Eventually Crowninshed will be a premier showplace It's our new adventure."

Margaret gives him a gaze of forbearance

'It's a once-in-a-lifetime chance. The place will be back to its old glory days. This is the house that hardware built, Regina. Does the name Crowninshed ring a bell? Think hardware.'

"Hardware?"

"That's Margaret's family on her mother's side, and it goes way back in history. Why, Crowninshed picks and shovels were on-site at the gold rush. America's victory gardens were spaded with Crowninshed tools during World War II. Today the company's smaller, and while it might not sound glamorous, such things as staples and nail guns . . ."

"Nails. Did you say nails?"

"Family reunions with Margaret's folks, all you hear is sixty-penny nails, ring nails, spiral nails. And the crown jewel, the Crowninshed nail guns. All patented."

These words flash like bloodred neon. Steven's body, his nailed skin. Leonard Vogler is still talking. Margaret gives a little shudder as from a chill in the sunless sunporch. I manage to ask, 'I'm curious. Is a nail gun like a real gun?"

'It speeds up the work tenfold,' Leonard says. "*Pam, pam, pam.* Shingles, boards, shoots those suckers like no tomorrow.' Margaret folds her arms as the afternoon darkens to dusk. No one has turned on a lamp. 'So now we're on the prowl for craftsmen, woodworkers, a team of landscape architects.' He reaches to pat his wife's knee, misses, and knocks over the cane. One sock bunches at his ankle. Awkward man.

I resolve to sit here till I learn when Steven last saw Leonard and Margaret Vogler, and till the three of us acknowledge his murder. The cane is back at Margaret's side. Vogler's necktie has flipped backward. He doesn't notice. 'I just wondered,' I say, "whether Steven was here shortly before he was killed."

They stare, soundless, at the word 'killed.' The clock chimes

the half hour. Wrong time, wrong timing. I relent. "You must have provided such a home to him."

The Lawrence years, Regina, were decisive.

Try another angle. "Steven must have been terribly interested in your new home project. Maybe he had one of the Crown-nished nail guns?"

Vogler's booming laugh is startling. "Steven," he says, "had absolutely no aptitude in that direction. You see, he was destined for a different future."

"For Corsair Financial?"

"For thoroughbred racing."

It's my turn to stop and stare. Vogler says, "As a business, Regina, I formed a partnership to develop a track and a racing season near Nashua, New Hampshire. There's nothing in this world like thoroughbreds. Businesses come and go, but racing gets in your blood."

"And Steven was part of the plan?"

Vogler clears his throat. "Why, yes, the fact is, the boy's size seemed a sure shot."

His smallness, Regina, as you saw in the albums.

He was horse crazy, too. Jockeys are trained in a system of apprenticeship, you see."

Jockeys? So Steven was going to be a jockey?

A native son of Lawrence, think of the publicity for the Vogler Stable right here in New England.

Until he grew. The growth spurt took everyone by surprise.

The shoe size fooled us. We guessed he'd top out at about a hundred, hundred and a quarter."

But then, Regina, Leonard did the right thing.

Absolutely right thing. Leonard and Margaret together, a portrait of righteousness.

"You continued to help him after he grew too large to be a jockey?"

We kept him in the bosom of the family. Fixed his teeth. Saw to the scholarships. The whole package. Vogler snaps the fighting cocks. Even when our interests shifted, when we backed off from racing and leased the bogs."

"Cranberries, Regina."

"Nothing says New England like cranberries, but our bogs were in Wisconsin. It was quite a commute."

"With Cape Cod bogland so dear, you see."

"And if the market hadn't—I mean, if crop yields had just been a point or two higher in those years, why, Ocean Spray would be our middle name." He makes a pudgy fist.

I look from one to the other. Vogler's business schemes over the years—were they financed by Corsair? By his first wife's money? Or Margaret's?

"Regina, if you know of artisans, don't hesitate. We'll soon make history in the restoration of Crowninshed Farms. The area will be buzzing with construction. Our own home deserves only the finest craftsmen." He thumbs the suspenders. The cocks leap.

Margaret bunches the hem of her dress against her knees. She gives Leonard a half-added gaze and says, "Steven was here on August third for dinner. It was my birthday. Drew and Dani came. We had fireworks. It was a lovely evening. Would you care for more tea, Regina?"

It's my cue. "Thanks, but I must go. I'm just wondering, is there anyone else to be contacted?"

Margaret wets her lips and hesitates. Vogler straightens his tie, clears his throat. They exchange glances.

"Anyone at all? Or perhaps I might ask Andrew and Danielle."

Margaret says, "Perhaps—" Her voice trails.

Leonard snaps down his glass. "What's the point?"

"For Drew and Dani's sake."

"What about us?"

"Leonard dear . . ."

They go back and forth until he says, "Margaret, if you must."

She clears her throat and says, "This is awkward, Regina, but you'll want to be in touch with Eleanor."

"Eleanor—?"

"Comber. Formerly Vogler."

"A relative?"

Vogler grunts.

With eyes closed, Margaret says, "Eleanor was Leonard's first wife. She's the mother of Drew and Danielle. You'll find her at Flint Ridge Trace. That's in Hamilton, here on the North Shore."

We rise. Margaret with her cane, me with this sudden bombshell. We recap plans for the service and promise to stay in touch, as if Leonard's ex has not ruptured the moment. I gather the photographs, and Leonard walks me out and points to the weedy fields to be landscaped in the spring, he boasts, with a pond and trout stream to boot. He flicks his wrist as if fly casting, pausing at the collapsed woodpile to ask whether I have a fireplace, then to insist on loading an armful of wood into my trunk for the winter. "It's apple, nature's very best firewood—a lesson learned from a little business venture in wood some years ago."

This very next moment happened so fast I can't be sure. Maybe signals got crossed. Maybe. Here's how it goes in replay. The applewood is loaded in, and I reach to close my trunk, my fingers extended—then feel a sharp current of air, yank back my hand just as Vogler bangs the trunk hatch down. It's nanoseconds and microns from a smash.

"Oh my goodness," Vogler says, "we nearly bit your hand. Your wrist, your poor fingers. Why, we could have done some

real damage. He shakes his head and snaps one suspender. "Oh, you'd have surgical pins and a metal plate, Regina. You'd have physical therapy for a very long time. You must be careful."

A blackbird circles overhead and drops a greenish splotch.

We wouldn't for the world want to see you hurt, Regina, not when you're so kind and helpful. Why, my Margaret would feel terrible. If anything happened, she wouldn't be able to forgive herself. You take care, now. We want you healthy. We want you all in one piece."

Chapter Twenty-five

Come anytime,' said Eleanor Comber of Flint Ridge Trace when I phoned to introduce myself. Anytime, she said in a whiskey voice when I spoke Steven Damelin's name. Anytime at all."

Which is universal for never.

'This very afternoon,' I shot back, and what could she say? In heavy gabardines and loafers, I pass the old stone walls and dark-stained fences of the horse farms on Boston's North Shore: White Gables, Heatherstone, Hawk's Nest. It's turned sunny, and fallen leaves carpet the fields in brown, though a few maples shimmer red and gold.

The entrance gates to Flint Ridge Trace are open wide, but the stone cairns that flank the gates bring me to a dead stop. Literally. I brake, lower my window, and stare. Each cairn is topped by a stone pineapple.

I'm spooked. Of course I am. My door marks, that Chinese grocer and dictionary and exchange with Hugh Lee, here's the

pineapple, the traditional symbol of welcome. Decoratively speaking, it's everywhere from mailboxes to cheese spreaders. But maybe this is different. Maybe the motif is a code. A sign just inside the gate reads "5 mph," and I take it personally: proceed with caution, Reggie.

The gravel roadway leads past a white Federal house and gray barn with a low roofline to a parking area with two Suburbans and a truck. Outside I hear a whinny, thudding hooves, and in the distance, an engine. It smells of hay and horses. In a far ring a rider exercises a tawny horse.

"Hello." A tall woman, late thirties, in denim and boots greets me, her thick dark hair tied back, face tanned, eyes sea blue. "You must be Regina. I'm Vicky. I'm a trainer. You might not want to shake hands, I'm dusty from currycombs."

I shake firmly.

"Eleanor will be with you. Come in."

So this is a horse barn. Big box stalls face each other across a wide aisle, the paneling a smooth dark hardwood. In front of each stall—I count fourteen—is a trunk with a brass nameplate. The horses peer out, fine heads with combed and clipped manes and ears at attention.

"They're beautiful."

"These horses are great. Eleanor's a legend. There's a long waiting list."

"To board them?"

"Yes. Our horses are schooled for hunting and shows. And dressage. Most of these horses were made here."

"Made?"

Vicky nods. "It means schooled. We don't say broken."

"Oh, the horse whisperer thing."

"Lots of positive reinforcement. It takes longer, but it's really the better way, except—" Vicky looks me in the eye. "When I

give a lesson, I always say, 'They're wonderful animals, but the fact is, a horse can kill you.' They weigh over half a ton, and they operate on fight-or-flight. There's a T-shirt in the horse catalogs that says 'I whisper, but my horse doesn't listen.' Do you ride?"

"Not since my summer camp days."

She pats the rump of a chestnut horse and explains the difference between a currycomb and dandy brush.

'Vicky, I hear that Andrew Vogler is a lifelong rider. You must know him?' She nods. 'And Steven Dameron?'

'Him too.' Her nod is curt, and she brushes the horse. Does she know the Vogler family history? Or that Steven is dead?

'Diablo,' she says at last. 'Steve and Drew owned Diablo together.' She points with her brush. "The far stall on the right is his. The name's on the tack trunk."

I walk down and peer in. Much bigger than the chestnut horse, so black he's blue. Diablo tenses at my approach, kicks hind hooves against the stall, and swings his massive neck from side to side, his long mane looking storm tossed. His eyes are fierce, and pink ridges glisten across the shoulders and haunches. Ointment on lacerations? His deep whinny sounds like a protest and threat. I backtrack to the open stall.

"Vicky, Diablo looks wild. I saw marks on his shoulders and rump. What are they?"

'They're going to be scars.' She reaches for a bridle.

"How did Diablo get cut?"

She lifts the bridle over the horse's head. 'Barbed wire will wound a horse. And scar it."

"I don't see any barbed wire."

She goes for a saddle. 'Eleanor's in the clubroom. She'll be right with you."

What clubroom? Why is there a lacerated horse in this horse whisperer barn that is owned and operated by an equestrian

legend'? The Flint Ridge trainer clearly did not want to talk about it.

Suddenly something thick and smooth wipes my leg. Claws dig in, and teeth sink into my fingers as I swat. "Ouch! Hey, cat, stop, quit that. Let go."

"Teaser, get away!" The voice is a whiskey tenor. The cat flees, and I face a woman in tan corduroy jodhpurs, high black boots, a ribbed sweater, and huge diamond drop earrings. "I'm Eleanor Comber."

Well over the age of fifty, the former Mrs. Leonard Vogler wears no makeup, but her green gray eyes suggest acquisition and vigilance. Her extended hand is sinew and bone.

"Never mind Teaser. His manners are dreadful, but he's a champion mouser. I've kept you waiting shamelessly, but I had to speak to our farrier. I still feel mixed about titanium shoes now, who left that door ajar?" She snaps a door shut. "If horses get into that feed room, they overeat and injure themselves. Everybody knows that. Let's go into the clubroom."

I'm ushered into a large room with an overstuffed sofa, chunky pine tables, and fox-head lamps. Photographs of horses and riders cover the walls, and prize ribbons band the room like a frieze. At the far end is a stairway to a second floor.

"Please sit down, Ms. Cutter."

"'Regina, if you will.' A chair nearest a phone seems to be Eleanor's own spot. I take the sofa. 'What a nice comfortable room."

What a banal remark. But Eleanor Comber smiles. 'We added this three years ago. Everyone seems to enjoy it. Upstairs we have a monitor to analyze tapes and DVDs of the different riders and horses." She studies me. "I take it you do not ride."

It's clearly a test. Summer camp rides on swaybacked nags won't count. "Not in recent years," I say, "but I once loved trail

rides. Your Flint Ridge stable brings it all back. I miss it. Perhaps one day I'll have the opportunity again.

Oh, you must. Horses are a way of life. Let's talk about this memorial service you say you're planning. My former husband has hired you, is that it?"

"On the contrary, I volunteered to help because Steven Damelin was close to my late aunt, Josephine Cutter."

Everyone felt close to Steven, Regina. He was the dearest boy. If Leonard hadn't meddled, both he and Drew would be right here where they belong, at Flint Ridge. I'm telling no secrets. My former husband ruined those boys with business. And now Steven's gone."

She bites her lip and strokes an earring. "Let me tell you something. Field sports were Dan's first love, but the boys were devoted to the barn, Drew from when he was a tyke, and Steven later on. He loved it here. It became his home."

"I gather your family virtually adopted him."

"He was our ward. My family, you see, has long reached out, even from New England's great days."

"Colonial times? The *Mayflower*?"

"That scraggly bunch, heavens no. I mean the truly great days of the mills, textiles, days of empire. Lowell, Tewksbury, of course Lawrence."

"Lawrence . . . Steven was from Lawrence."

From, yes, but families like the Combers *were* Lawrence. The Atlantic Mills . . . our woolens were shipped all over the world. And the world came to work for us."

Immigrants? Steven's family came from Lithuania.

Slovaks starving in the old country, that's the fact. We gave them work in our mills, supported them one and all. They had housing and plenty to eat. Were they grateful? They bit the hand that fed them. The year was 1912, the nadir. None of it is

Steven's fault, of course, and history must be forgiven. But that tiny boy was heaven-sent. He made a world of difference because Drew was such a hellion. My own son, I called him Rascal. Sweet as an angel, little Drew, and mean as the devil. He played havoc with his little sister. I swear he drove her to field hockey. No wonder she was a picky eater, half starved herself. Come over here, won't you?"

At a far wall, Eleanor points to a group of photographs much like the Voglers'. She taps one of a dark-featured little boy, perhaps six or seven, in riding clothes astride a full-size horse. He glowers.

"That's Drew on Skipper. He was disqualified for unsportsmanlike behavior. I was frantic. Regina, you do know about barn companions? No? Some high-strung horses need companions to calm them down. Most often, it's a dog. But we've had a monkey out here, a goat, even a duck. A horse barn can be a menagerie.

But sometimes it takes a docile horse to calm a temperamental one. They'll share a stall, a paddock, the same pasture. Some spend their lives together. Look over here."

She points at photos showing two boys, one very small. Both smile, proud and happy. "Ribbons galore. If Drew won firsts and seconds, Steven took the rest. But Drew mastered himself, you see, learned the discipline."

She looks hard at me. "Steven was that kind of companion to Drew. His stablemate."

"I understand Steven might have become a jockey."

"Nonsense. That was Leonard's foolishness. My former husband had two insane schemes. One was the notion of a racetrack in New Hampshire. The other was a belly dancer who's now his wife. Her family business is tools. Leonard was beguiled and blinded. He went for sex and got sickness, so what goes around

comes around. I'll say no more, except that Steven would be a trainer by now. My family are horsemen and -women, Regina. In the great days of the Lawrence Atlantic Mills, Evelina Comber straddled her horse like a man and galloped on the coaching roads. She begged to join her brothers in the militia."

"In wartime?"

"In the terrible strike against our private property—January 1912, the winter when the Slovaks bit the hand that fed them. Right off the boat, barely ten words of English, but they stampeded out of the mills and massed like cattle in the streets of Lawrence. They were nothing but rabble, a mob. In the dead of winter, they froze and starved themselves for greed. That's what it was, pure greed, a base and terrible thing."

She strokes her earring. "The great mills are long gone, but our bloodlines reli to this day. Nature unfolds. If Leonard hadn't interfered, Drew would be preparing to take over and expand Flint Ridge, and Steven groomed to be his head trainer, a life's work, and the sky's the limit. Stables all over the country would compete to hire him, talented as he was. Drew, of course, would keep him here at Flint Ridge." A flush rises on Eleanor's cheeks. "Steven's true life was thrown off course, and that's why he's gone."

It's as if Steven's murder was a foregone conclusion once he exited the horse barn. "Ms. Comber, I've looked at the beautiful horses here in your barn, and I learned that Diablo belonged jointly to Andrew and Steven."

She stiffens and falls silent. "Yes, Diablo belongs to both boys. They came out to ride once or twice a week."

"I noticed the wounds on the horse's shoulders and rump—buttocks. I wondered how Diablo got hurt."

She toes the floor with her boot. "I—we're not sure."

"Not sure? But didn't Andrew or Steven tell you?"

The green gray eyes are now defiant. "Perhaps you saw the trailers outside. We take our horses to shows, to other farms. Everyone enjoys riding in new places." She brushes at her jodhpurs. "But sometimes troublesome situations arise. When you ride on unfamiliar trails, brambles and briars can come up unexpectedly. There isn't always ample room to turn around in heavy brush. Brambles and thorns can wound a horse." The whiskey voice rises. "Of course, the boys loved Diablo. Loved him. They came to ride as often as possible, although lately Drew has precious little free time. He's bound body and soul to Leonard's business. And Steven, too, strived to prove himself, working for Leonard."

"And mentoring a young teen, a Latino named Luis. Did Steven ever bring him here?"

"A Mexican?"

"He's from the Dominican Republic."

"Dominicans, they're taking over Lawrence. No, Steven wouldn't bring him here. We school horses, and our stable hands are Americans. We're not a halfway house for illegal aliens." Her mouth tightens. "I'm surprised to hear Steven had time for charity work. Leonard's business is demanding, and, of course, Steven got so caught up in his own big idea."

"I don't believe I know about that."

"Helping Hand."

"What? What did you say?"

"He called it Helping Hand."

"Is it a charity? A business?"

"Services of some kind or other. Yes, a business, something he was trying to prove to himself. We loved him just the way he was, of course. We feared he got above himself. Above and beyond."

What kind of business was Helping Hand?

But at that moment, someone taps on the clubroom door. It's a short, thickset man with wiry brown hair. Eleanor says, "Mike, please saddle Aztec."

"Yes, ma'am."

I'm bursting to ask more about Steven's Helping Hand. So it was not a casual cliche, but a business. Jo knew about it, was in on it. And what about the pineapple farms? I want to talk privately with Vicky. Ms. Comber, you've been most generous. If I may borrow a couple of Steven's equestrian photos for the memorial service, and perhaps a prize ribbon or two? And perhaps I could ask Vicky for a word of reminiscence for the service?

In due course, but Vicky has a lesson to give. Though you needn't go just yet. Her voice is two hundred proof. "Let me offer you a ride, Regina."

You mean ride a horse? Did I give her the wrong impression?

It's a fine autumn day, and we've had so few this season. The air is fresh, the sun bright. Our creek trail is perfect.

How generous of you. It's a wonderful thought, but, of course, I couldn't possibly."

That's why we keep Aztec. He's gentle, just the ticket for someone like yourself. Everybody loves Aztec.

"If only I had the proper clothing."

"We'll get you chaps from the tack room."

"Perhaps another time."

"Look outside, Regina. Mike's already got the saddle out."

She opens the clubroom door and leads me to the open stall with a bridled dappled gray horse. It's huge. The wiry haired man has thrown a blanket over its back. He looks my way. "Mike's the name."

"I'm Regina Cutter."

Mike's been with us forever. Flint Ridge couldn't go a week

without him. Let's try these.' Before I can stop her, Eleanor Comber steps into the tack room for a pair of leather pants minus the crotch and rear end. 'You remember schooling chaps. These ought to fit.' She thrusts the chaps into my hands. "Here you go."

No, I don't. This has gone too far. The woman is impossible, her domination masked as generosity. Although I got myself into this. There's nobody to blame but me. The chaps are heavy in my hands as I push them back toward her. She does not take them. "Eleanor, I regret any misunderstanding, but I don't ride."

"Mike will ride with you."

"Thanks, but no."

"Every rider begins as a beginner, Regina. Including my son and Steven too. Mike remembers, don't you, Mike?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Every step of the way, Mike taught the boys the ways of the barn and the care of horses. He was their big guy, and they called him Chief. Drew calls you Chief to this day, doesn't he, Mike?"

"That he does, Ms. E."

"So, Regina, we can't take no for an answer."

Clutching the chaps, my hands go cold and clammy. Is this a treacherous setup or a gateway to information? Assuming that Mike is a storehouse of knowledge about Andrew Vogler and Steven, I could take the ride and strike up a pointed conversation about them. Maybe he knows something about Helping Hand.

The call and response, however, between Eleanor Comber and her manager could set me for a fall. Literally a fall from the saddle of a very high horse. Suppose this woman thinks I've come on an errand for her despised ex-husband and Margaret. Suppose she wants to punish me for coming here and asking questions. What if she somehow figures in Steven's murder and wants to get rid of me too.

Then again, suppose she's only domineering by temperament, and I miss the chance to learn something important from Mike, who's been here forever? And perhaps later on from Vicky, who's about to give a lesson. Here comes the pupil now, an auburn haired woman in riding clothes who nods to us and proceeds down the row of stalls to her horse. Surely Eleanor Comber wouldn't risk her reputation by staging an accident easily witnessed by others. So let Eleanor Comber's insistence be a wedge to more information. A short ride on a notably gentle horse. **Reggie, take it.**

So I get the chaps on, fasten the buckles at the hips and pelvis. My loafers will have to do. But that horse towers, and the saddle **is so slim, and nothing to hold on to.**

Mike will take Red, Regina. But do make friends with Aztec first. Keep your hand flat. I'm sure it's all coming back to you."

I put my palm against the velvety muzzle. "Nice Aztec." The horse scours my hand with his tongue and deposits saliva and some dark chewed bits. "Nice horse," I say, wiping the mess on the chaps, which feel heavy and thick. Outdoors, in the center of the ring with a student, Vicky waves, so near and yet so far. **Patience, Reggie.**

"Nice Aztec."

Mike ties him and goes for another horse. The dappled gray neck feels like warm rock. Come to think of it, weren't the Aztecs fierce warriors? Sacrificed maidens? Drank enemies' blood? Why name the gentlest horse Aztec? A Commonwealth of Massachusetts sign nailed to a post catches my eye, doubtless required by law, a disclaimer of responsibility for injury or death given the inherent danger of the activity. Mike leads out a dark reddish horse.

Up you go, Regina." Onto a granite two-step block. I'm aboard, the stirrups adjusted. Mike hands me the reins. "I'll lead

on Red, and Aztec will follow. Hold your reins loosely in your fingers. We'll take it slow."

"And take the creek trail, Mike." The whiskey tenor speaks.

"The creek, Ms. E.? You're sure about that?"

"Absolutely. A bracing stream on an autumn day, what could be more refreshing? Have a good ride, Regina. Remember, Mike, the creek trail."

Mike hesitates and blinks, but we set off: the far fields glowing dark gold in the light. The horse feels like a set of upholstered bones, and I'm up high without a helmet. Mike is too. Perhaps this is a custom at Flint Ridge Trace.

A chat with Mike, that's the goal, as soon as we're out of earshot of the barn. I'll casually bring up Steven and Drew. Down a dirt road, I ask whether the distant stubble fields are the property of Flint Ridge Trace. He says yes, Ms. Comber raises corn for feed, then he asks how I'm doing.

"Fine."

"Saddle feel all right?"

"Great." I'll be sore tomorrow. The dirt road becomes a path, and the trees thicken. We're single file, with Mike ahead. The chaps are awkward. It's time to talk. My opener is, "How old is Aztec?"

"Eight years." Mike gives his horse some clucking sounds, but human conversation is awkward, impossible, in single file. We approach a fork in the trail. Mike calls, "Creek ahead," and the horses move down an embankment toward a streambed.

"You okay back there?"

"Okay."

The two horses walk in shallow water, hooves plashing in a creek bed paved with fallen leaves. We round a bend. Maybe the creek will widen so we can ride side by side. No such luck.

"Stirrups feel good?"

'Good so far. Equipment problems, is that my best shot? If I can get just a few minutes face-to-face with this man. Suppose I complain about my saddle or reins. Too tight? Loose? But need check, and we'll be back on the trail in the blink of an eye.

In the flick of a horse's tail.

"Mike?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

My leg. I think I'm getting a cramp in my left calf. Yes, a cramp. Could we stop for just a minute?"

His "Whoa, boy" is music to my ears. At the edge of the creek, he'd dismounts, holds his horse and mine, and helps me down. I make a show of massaging my left calf. Ooh, ooh.

"You want to go back?"

'Oh no, what a relief. Just give me a few minutes, can you?'

"No problem."

"The horses won't mind?"

"They're used to it."

Ooh. I knead my calf, my feet half sinking in cold creek side mud, my loafers ruined. 'Gentle Aztec,' I say. 'I suppose a horse like Aztec is too tame for Drew Vogler.'

Mostly. But Azzie has his ways, don't you, boy? But not today. Today you're sweet as sugar."

And too sweet for Steven—may he rest in peace.' Mike nods. 'You were here at Flint Ridge when they were boys.'

Oh yes. He tugs Aztec's saddle, a quick test.

I pump my calf. 'Boys can be so mischievous. Were Drew and Steven?"

"Can't say about that. Can't say either way."

Diablo looks so wild. 'Did Steven and Drew like the risk of a wild horse?"

"I wouldn't know as you'd say risk."

"Two owners of one horse, is that common?"

"Common for them."

"Maybe they competed, each trying to be the best on Diablo?"

"Nobody's business but theirs."

"I understand Steven was starting a business. He mentioned it to me." Silence from Mike. "I haven't met Drew yet. I bet he's very competitive."

Mike gives me a long flat look. "What's good about a horse, lady, is they don't ask a bunch of questions. Work around horses, you get to like them better than people, if you get my drift. How's that leg, better?"

"I think so, yes." My cheeks flush despite the early November chill. Strikeout.

Wordless, he laces and cups his fingers to make a stirrup. "Let's get you back on. Give him his head in the water. Don't pull the reins. He'll find his footing by himself."

I do. We go a few hundred yards. By an overhanging tree, however, Aztec stops to chew yellowed leaves at the end of a branch. I nudge his sides lightly and say, "Giddyup, Aztec." He turns his head around, takes a step forward, and chews some more.

Suppose the leaves make him sick. Up ahead, Mike's horse moves along the stream. I kick a little harder and then flick the reins against Aztec's hide. No action. More chewing. I call out to Mike, who turns, circles back, and gives the horse a smart smack against his rump.

As if motorized, as if ignited, the horse tenses and leaps forward, dashing in the stream. "Pull him up," Mike calls. "Not too hard—" I grab at the reins. "Not so hard! Pull up!" But there is nothing to get my hands around, no grip. The horse is running in the water. My ankles are wet. I try to hold the saddle, a little ridge at the front. Come on, Mike, help me out.

But Aztec plunges, then runs at the bank as if to rear, his body

going vertical. Keep your head, Reggie. Lean forward against the mane. Brace in the stirrups. Do not slide backward. The horse gains higher ground and runs. I crouch on the saddle. He's pointed homeward toward the barn, but way too fast.

"Mike!"

I call to the wind but hear the hoofbeats of Mike's Red coming from behind, closing in. Mike calls orders I can't hear. I grab Aztec's mane.

He runs, full gallop, his ears flat.

"Mike! Mike!"

Trees are coming, bare branches dead ahead. I duck. My cheek is whipped, so near my eye. Then a huge branch my head. I'm facedown against the mane and neck. How did my foot get out of the stirrup? I have no right footing. The whole stirrup flops.

"Mike!"

My body leans, tilts left as I paw my right foot at the loose stirrup, try to connect, miss again. Another big branch, and the bark just grazes my scalp.

And then, just as suddenly, Aztec slows, breaks his run, walks, finally stops. His sides heave. I am panting. Mike now approaches from behind.

But here's a new feeling—as if sinking. Literally sinking. Aztec, he is sinking under me. Collapsing.

"Aztec, no!" Mike's voice is alarmed.

Dear God, heart attack, the horse dying right under me. Nearly killing me . . . and then dying.

"No, Aztec!"

It is all slow motion now, the horse down and down, Mike dismounting and running, calling, "No!" as I try to get off.

But my left foot is stuck in the stirrup. Stuck as the horse sinks—and then begins to roll. Left. Roll onto me. Not collapsing, not at all. It's a deliberate move, to roll.

One thought: if I do not clear my foot, the horse will roll over me. Crush me. It whinnies, neighs. What does a breaking bone sound like? Pelvis? I thrash, jerk my left foot—

And break free, free my leg and jump aside just as Aztec completes his rollover, stands, flicks his tail, and trots barnward. A bird cries, a plane flies overhead. Mike is at my side holding Red's reins. He breathes hard, puts his hand on my shoulder as I pant, wheeze, feel the upsurge deep inside my gut, turn sideways, and throw up.

Chapter Twenty-six

Still nauseated, I ransack Jo's medicine chest this same evening for antidotes to the runaway and rollover horse. The raging question: was I set up, or did I set myself up?

Like a tape loop, the post-Aztec moment in the barn obsessively replays in my mind. "Naughty Aztec," chided Eleanor Comber as I stumbled in, wiped my mouth, and asked for water. She handed me two of Steven's prize ribbons and a photo. "Naughty, naughty boy!"—this as I dropped the chaps while a horse thundered in a stall deep inside the barn. "Diablo?"

"Walk Azzie and cool him down, Mike," said Eleanor. "He's lathered."

"Ms. Comber—Eleanor," I asked her, "is Drew expected here this evening? I'd like to talk with him . . . about the memorial service."

"If he comes, he'll want to ride, not reminisce."

"It'll only take a little while."

"My son needs relaxation, Regina, not grief.

'I can wait.' Though sweat-soaked and close to retching, I held my ground, threatening a sit-in. The push-pull with Eleanor Comber got me this: an appointment to speak with Andrew Vogler at Corsair Financial tomorrow afternoon. That's how Eleanor got rid of me—for now.

What was she thinking?

Jo's medicine chest has a box of Epsom salts for a tub soak, a chance to think and plan. With the tap open, hot water thunders into the deep old tub, and I get out the fluffiest, biggest bath towel and a new bar of lavender soap, test the temperature, and ease in and down to my chin. The blissful spa feeling comes over me, and for moments I am weightless in the salts bath and released from thought itself.

When reflection presses in, it's rueful. The horse show ribbons that Eleanor has lent me are not Steven's first place blues, but yellow and green. Even in death, he's an honorable mention, a stablemate but not a winner. Both Leonard and Eleanor disdained a man who was gay—and ethnic. Steven's hardscrabble family on Croker Street is the surface, but Eleanor's scorn goes deeper, to the "Slovaks." Does she know Steven's family name was once Damelinski? From his boyhood, did she give her son the message that Steven Damelinski was second-rate?

Or dispensable?

The phone rouses me from the tub. Perhaps it's Magda to say that Alex Ribideau has been found? No, it's Molly. What am I up to? she asks.

"A nice bath."

"Mom, you're a shower girl. Why the tub?"

I'm trying some bath salts, dear. What's new? She tells me that sculptor Tom Chou is still unsure about the blood marks on my door and wants to consult pals from the Chinese mainland.

It's beyond exasperation. "Since when does it take Beijing and Shanghai?"

Mom, I'm just telling you what he said. I'm just the messenger, okay?"

Okay. Molly, tell me, does the term 'helping hand' have any special meaning in your generation?"

"No."

"Maybe from a song lyric?"

"Not from the indie bands that I listen to, Mom. Maybe commercial pop, but I doubt it."

I thought maybe it's new slang among younger people. I do not admit to having googled it at the first minute back at Barlow Square. Steven Damelin + Helping Hand." Nothing came up.

"So how about that hot lunch date, Mom? Is the guy taking you dancing?"

Actually, Mol, dancing is on my mind. In fact the Web site of the Jeremiah Steele Dance Company shows Alex Ribideau in a gazelle midleap and proclaims him an acclaimed dancer. An AWOL dancer? A killer?

"Message me, Mom. Bye."

"Bye, dear. Take care."

I towel dry and pull on a sweat suit. Can I relax, walk the dog, and settle in with a book, a little TV? Walk Biscuit, yes, but there's unfinished business here in my house. Steven's bottle, the whiskey bottle he gave Jo, the bottle that Crystal sneered at.

The pale green bottle that brought on those voices, the shouts of anger, the hard crack on the head. There it sits. QUART with brie a brac atop the shelf. But Jo felt its power, and I, too, before the crack on the head. Can I hold it once again and perhaps learn something more about Steven? Can it teach me, offer a clue to help track a killer even if it deals me a blow?

In minutes, it's in my hands Blanchard & Farrar, Dock Square, Boston Biscuit watches with mild interest So far, nothing psychic is happening I walk the bottle from the front room to the kitchen The dog follows Still nothing I hold it closer against me The glass clinks against a zipper tab Am I resisting? Blocking a vision? I hug it tighter, then outstretched in my hands like an offering A moment passes, two, three Wait, Reggie. Let the moment be.

Then the kitchen light flickers, and Biscuit whines Now it starts, a low rumble, voices, the utterances I can't make out They're guttural, dissonant, heavy on consonants They gather at the mouth of the bottle and come through a mist like frosty breath on a cold day I sense men's whiskers, women's cloaks and again the babushkas The volume intensifies, and arguments erupt, loud and heated, and shouting, the feeling of a crowd The voices shout at one another in a mix of fears Yes, it's fear but along with it a surge of of energy An updraft of energy Something wants to fly, to soar amid this fear

Then an aroma like cabbage, like a soup broth But now comes whiskey, as if the bottle were uncorked, surely self suggestion on my part I must be carried away with the object in my hands, my sixth sense prompting the tang of distilled spirits And now another scent bread Yes, a fresh-baked loaf yeasty and warm There's no loaf here in my kitchen Am I hungry? Am I somehow intervening in this vision?

Now an image it's floral, a bright red There are no cut flowers in my house A few mums out front, but this is different It's a rose, roses I'm smelling cabbage and whiskey and fresh bread I see a bouquet of roses as the voices rise to a near roar The odors sharpen, each distinct, a loaf of bread, and cabbage and whiskey And the roses Biscuit is yelping and rolling on her

back on the kitchen floor in a frenzy. I'm dazed, intoxicated by the sights and sounds and spirit.

And then *zing*, the crack on my head. Sudden as before, it's hard glass against my skull. This time I brace my legs, release the bottle, and grab the countertop. I manage to remain standing. Biscuit is crouched down, growling low. The scents now fade, evaporate. The quarrelsome crowd is going, gone. QUART lies on the counter, inert and benign.

"Good morning."

Good morning. It's 10:01 a.m., as A. Arthur Graver, specialist in antique glass, opens its door for business here on Charles Street at the foot of Beacon Hill. Holding a polishing cloth, a short round aproned man says, "Forgive the buttery. I'm giving a few fruit compote bowls a quick lick. I'm Arthur Graver. How might I help you?"

I'm Regina Cutter, Mr. Graver. I have a bottle in this bag. Perhaps I should've phoned. This isn't fine glassware. I have an old whiskey bottle, and I'm hoping for—"

"An appraisal?"

"Not for monetary value. I'd like information on its history."

His eyes and eyeglasses form one bright twinkle. "Let's have a look."

QUART is shrouded in a towel, and I hold my breath as he pulls it from the canvas Bean tote and grips it in both hands. "It's not a bottle."

"What?"

"It's a flask, because of the flattened sides." He turns it, holds it to the light. I'm uneasy. Suppose this man begins to hear the voices . . . or smell the odors."

It's molded glass with a double collar lip and a heavily whittled neck. There's some light stain but no chips or cracking. It's

a nice old piece, early twentieth century. What else do you wish to know?"

"Anything . . . you don't sense any . . . energies?"

"From the flask? Superstitious feelings, madam, are not my forte. Is it the glassware that interests you, or the distiller?"

"It came from a family in Lawrence. I realize it's not your specialty."

He chuckles. "This flask reminds me of the barn auctions of my younger days. We sold off a good many bottles and flasks. I may still have a reference book." From the rear of the shop, he brings a binder and goes through it while I eye the bottle—flask—as if it might explode. "Blanchard & Farrar. Dock Square, here we are. You say price isn't your concern."

"No. Was the whiskey distributed as far as Lawrence?"

"Very likely. Rail service was excellent between Boston and Lawrence by the turn of the century. Of course, the temperance folks fought the whiskey business, but Blanchard is a good old New England name, and the Blanchard & Farrar distillery bottled several different brands." He runs a finger down a page. "My book lists Old Dock and Clover Leaf, but the premium whiskey was Beacon Club. Your flask . . . its paper label is long gone, but I'd guess it's the cheaper spirits."

"For public taverns?"

"And kitchen barrooms."

"What?"

He chortles. "Just what it sounds like, taverns in home kitchens in Lawrence."

"Family taverns?"

"Women typically ran them, but the patrons were men. The kitchens were warm in the winter, homey and comfortable. The men played cards, and the women had themselves a nice little business. Of course, the city fathers tried to shut them down, but

they dotted the neighborhoods of the mill workers. You do know about the Lawrence mills?"

"A little."

"Chances are, if it came from Lawrence, your flask contained the whiskey of mill workers. They probably tippled in a kitchen bar in an area called the Plains."

"The Plains—that's it. That's the neighborhood."

"There you are. Mystery solved."

I wish.

The Orange Line subway car clanks and jerks and smells of hot grease and ripe sneakers. Every seat is taken. It's 2:06 p.m., and I'm avoiding the parking hassles around the Corsair Financial building. QUART is back on my top shelf, untouched by me, thanks to several tweets, though I don't feel closer to finding Steven's killer. The flask took me to a world of primal fear and hope in the Plains neighborhood where Steven's family rooted as immigrants. Though the kitchen bar was a business venture. Someone in Steven's family defied the odds and got a business going on the side. How does that history connect to his life?

To his death?

I grip a pole in this subway car and flex knees in a ski slope tactic to stay upright. At each lurch, my muscles cry foul from day after miseries of Flint Ridge Trace's beloved Aztec.

Suppose Drew Vogler follows the family tradition of near misses. If not a slamming car trunk or runaway horse, maybe some kind of hanging plant falling from its bracket. In a gray and cream basket-weave skirt and jacket, I've got the Xerox of the Corsair sheet that the Right True Clear crew found behind Steven's mantel. At the right moment, I'll ask. Maybe it's connected to Helping Hand.

The man who greets me on the seventeenth floor of a brass and

glass high-rise looks uncannily like Steven except for the mustache. He's about six feet, thirty-plus, in dark slacks, a navy blazer, and club tie, his face the jaundice yellow of a fading tan.

'Andrew Vogler,' he says. 'Call me Drew. Welcome.'

But we shake hands with conspicuous delicacy on his part. No wonder. The fingers and the backs of his hands are raked with raw cuts and deep red gashes.

"If you'll follow me, Ms. Cutter. Sarita, please hold my calls." This to a gorgeous Latina receptionist with espresso eyeliner. We enter a small conference room with Aalto chairs and paintings of clipper ships and horses.

"Ms. Cutter, I'm sorry about your mishap with Aztec yesterday. My mother is seriously concerned. Everyone's embarrassed. Please sit here so you don't have to look at any horses, not even in picture frames."

His courtesy is touching. He holds my chair, seats me before a bank of sailing ships across the birch table. He displays his hands in plain sight, like a European at dinner.

"My mother hopes you're feeling better."

'Eleanor needn't worry. No one forced me into the saddle. Please tell her I'm a bit sore but unharmed.'

"You're a good sport. But I can tell you that horse is—excuse my vulgar language—Aztec is a crotch rocket, especially on the creek trail. You're not the first, but I guarantee you're the last. This time Mother's learned her lesson."

So Andrew Vogler practically admits I was booby-trapped. Keep calm, Reggie. Keep your head. The fact is, I'm fixated on his hands, trying not to stare. Steven's death wounds fill my mind. Have the police seen these gashes?

'How about coffee, Ms. Cutter—or join me in a bottled water?"

Drew is a Ritz bartender. Andrew flaunts the wounds while

handling glasses and ice from a concealed fridge. He winces but chats as if nothing's wrong.

Sorry, fresh out of lemon wedges." We drink. Then he reaches gingerly into his inside pocket and puts an envelope on the table between us. "This is a list of names for the memorial service. Corsair people and old acquaintances from a few years ago. They're on address labels. We put a roll of stamps in there."

"How thoughtful."

"Sarita worked hard to get everybody, but it's been so neat and miserable around here."

Since Steven's —I say it deliberately— murder.

He looks me straight in the eye and nods. "Savage, barbaric— no words fit. We're all in shock. The whole office is on edge. The police have been here every day to question our brokers. Dad flew in for a long interview with them last week. My turn's this afternoon. I understand you were Steve's new landlady?"

Yes.

"They say you found the . . . him."

"*They* say?"

"Nobody in particular. Office talk: e-mails across the cubicles."

So I'm a Corsair factoid. "It's true," I say. "And it was gruesome beyond description."

His face pales beneath the yellowed tan. "But we're very thankful for your help on the memorial service. You'll want to ask my sister about singing. She does Mozart, all the classical. Here's her number. She hangs out at a boathouse on the Charles, the Renfrew Rowing Club. Andrew spells Renfrew. Steve loved Dana's pop style. 'I Will Always Love You' was his favorite."

Suddenly he breaks off, squeezes his eyelids shut, takes out a handkerchief, and daubs his eyes. "Excuse me— losing it. This

is the first death of someone really close, and the service is going to be tough." His eyes film over. "Damn."

I know you were close to Steven. Both your parents—and Margaret—told me you were like brothers."

"Since grade school. Practically a whole lifetime."

"And you saw one another almost every day." Which I know is untrue. I want to see his reaction.

He keeps blinking. "Actually, in recent years, Ms. Cutter, I didn't see Steve that much. Our schedules didn't fit. He worked out of his apartment, and he came into the office at odd hours. Outside Corsair, we traveled different routes. I think we just took each other for granted. He was around, I was around. We e-mailed constantly, moved the paperwork—but mostly from our workstations. Workwise, we were in sync. If you don't mind—I'm trying to kick the cigarettes." He pops a piece of beige gum. "Nicotine to combat nicotine. Strange. Everything feels strange now. I hope the church is big, because it's going to be crowded. Most people on that list would tell you Steve did them some special favor. Me most of all."

"Because you were so close."

He nods. "Steve'd give the shirt off his back. To me, he was like a counselor. A couple years ago, I was ready to quit Corsair. Money isn't everything. I felt stuck in an office with a phone grafted to my ear. A fishing camp in Maine was up for sale. It seemed a better bet."

"You felt burned-out?"

Burnout for sure. I called Steve, and we went out for chicken fingers and a bucket of brews. And I told him I felt like a money machine. He knew I couldn't tell my dad. He built Corsair from nothing. It's his big success—did he tell you about the cranberries? Well, let's not go into that. Anyway, I laid it out to

Steve. And you know what? When we left that eatery, my life was turned around."

"No more Maine?"

"Here's what Steve said to me. 'You're not their money machine, you're their pilot. You fly them to their destination. It's service work. That's the point.'"

"Like, humanitarian service?"

"It's not so far fetched. A high-energy investor can get reckless, a timid one too cautious. Opportunities are lost either way. People's lives can take off or crash. Look at the market collapse, the stock scandals. Investment is personal. The right advice means everything. You see, our specialty here at Corsair is select stocks we earmark for high performance in the short run. Contrary to some viewpoints, the creation of wealth need not move at a snail's crawl nor risk disaster. The hare can beat the tortoise."

So you and Steven worked together on higher risk projects?

"High-risk great opportunities."

I'm ready to ask about the scrawled mantel sheet but see pale adhesive marks on the skin of his hands, as if he's just now pulled off bandages. He did not cut himself piloting stock portfolios.

"Ms. Cutter, I'm probably talking too much about myself."

"No, we're remembering Steven. He gave me first aid when I fell on the street the day before his death. He was quite close to my late aunt, Josephine Cutter. He called her Jo. Did you ever meet her?"

"Josephine Cutter? I don't think so."

Steven said he sometimes helped her, gave her a helping hand."

He doesn't even blink. Not one facial feature reacts to the term. Nor do his shoulders move, nor fingers.

I wonder, was my aunt a Corsair client? I'm her heir, you see, and I'm still trying to sort out her financial records."

Hey, easy to check." He hits a phone button. "Ned, see if the name Josephine Cutter appears in our master client file. *C-u-t-t-e-r*." We wait. Ned replies, no Cutter.

I suppose that unofficial advice on Steven's part would violate Corsair company rules."

SEC regulations, you mean. A rep would be subject to fine or suspension. The Securities and Exchange Commission is tough and getting tougher."

"I see."

"Unless maybe Steve advised your aunt on an informal basis."

"That's possible. As I said, he gave her a helping hand."

Still, no visible reaction. "Was your aunt a person of means?"

She was a high school teacher. Her income was modest.

"Well, Corsair wouldn't like it, but nobody'd make a federal case out of a few tips to a little old lady—no offense to your aunt."

Which tells me Andrew never met Jo, because nobody would call Jo Cutter an LOL.

"Remember, Ms. Cutter, I didn't see much of Steve here at the office the last couple years. He turned up for family occasions, my stepmother's birthday, and, of course, at Flint Ridge. You could say it this way—I like the ladies, but Steve decided to swing with the guys. A whole lot follows from that, if you know what I mean. I'm not judging good or bad, just saying there's a big difference."

He holds out his hands. "But underneath everything, I have one huge consolation. You probably noticed all these cuts? A nurse scrubbed them with a brush, pure torture. And they got infected, so it's taken longer. I just took off the gauze and tape this morning." He holds them up. "There's something particular I can tell you—if you have the time, I mean—it's about me and Steve."

"I'll make the time."

He stows the gum in one cheek. "You were busy with Aztec so I don't suppose you saw our horse, Diablo? He's one hell of a horse. Steve and I owned him together fifty-fifty. It's the one thing we shared, and Steve paid his half for boarding even though I rode him most of the time. Steve didn't own a car, so I was usually the one at Flint Ridge."

"I saw Diablo," I say.

He hesitates. "So did you happen to notice his buttocks and shoulders?"

"The lacerations?"

"It's that obvious. Who am I fooling? You probably got the whole Andrew-and-Steve story too, because my mother loves telling the before and after. I'll bet she showed you photos and ribbons from when I was seven years old, didn't she? She probably told you that I was the wild child? I'm used to it, more or less. I'm the one who broke the rules, drove everybody crazy. My poor sister, no wonder she's anorexic. Anyway, with Steve it's true, things calmed down."

He manages a boy-devil smile. "Don't think Steve and I were choirboys. One summer we caddied and crashed golf carts racing on a fairway at night. We were both tired and spent the rest of that summer fishing. And of course, riding at Flint Ridge. Looking back, though, without Steve I'd probably be in jail. I mean that, jail."

"Surely that's more fear than reality, Mr. Vogler."

"Drew. Call me Drew." He pops another nicotine gum, chews hard, looks away. "Can I tell you a secret? The night before he was—the night before he died I had no chance to come to Steve's rescue. That's my consolation."

"You mean that Monday?"

"Monday night—and I've been hiding my mother ever since

At least Diablo's healing. There's no infections, so Vicky tells me. She's a good soldier, keeps things quiet, but she suspects some kind of negligence. As for scarring, we'll have to wait and see." He tugs at his tie. "I felt terrible about it, and so did Steve. My first worry was to dress the cuts, and the second—"

"Drew, you're losing me."

"Sorry. That Monday was just a horrible night." He swirls his ice. "Who'd guess that Steve would decide to take Diablo for a night ride? Just a snap decision. He borrowed a car and headed up to Flint Ridge. Mother wasn't home. He went to the barn, saddled up, thought he knew the trail, but he got lost in the woods. Flint Ridge joins other farms, you see, and there's trails for miles. Anyway, Steve got caught in brambles, then a barbed wire fence."

He shakes his head. "Hell, it could've been me. Diablo was nearly out of control when Steve called. It was a good thing he had his phone. I jumped out of bed and raced up there. He'd managed to get the horse back to the barn. It must have been two a.m. by then. I parked down the road and walked in so Mother wouldn't wake up. We cooled Diablo down and sprayed him with an antibiotic. But we forgot to test his reaction to the spray—that aerosol hiss. It spooked him all over again, and, oh Lord, we had a fight on our hands in the stall that night. Wonder we both weren't ki— . . . badly injured."

He flexes his fingers, winces. "If I have scars, it's my own fault. But Diablo—no animal deserves to suffer from an owner's negligence. Steve felt terrible. So did I. So do I at this very minute." Drew looks me in the eye. "For the first time I can remember, Steve was the one in trouble, and I helped out."

I search my memory for the image of Steven's hands, which were unblemished. I'm sure of it. Not a mark on either hand.

But you both must have been injured." I say this in a neutral tone, testing.

"Steve took a couple kicks in the gut, but he had a heavy jacket and gloves. I made him keep them on. No point both of us getting hurt. You see, Steve planned to tell my mother in person, but he didn't—hadn't told her. And a couple days later, he was, I mean, it was . . . too late."

He looks desolate. My mother is a wonderful person and one tough cookie. I have to tell her about all this in person, but I'm going to take the rap, say that I took Diablo out that night. This is for Steve's memory. Whatever she wants to dish out, I'll take it. I want somebody to know the real truth. Better a stranger. You're my dress rehearsal. Here, let me." He refills my glass as if pouring champagne. "I hope you're not offended."

"Not at all."

"Thank you." He bites his lip. "So when Dad talked about the memorial service, Ms. Cutter, I knew the one thing to memorialize, the stable and the horses. I'll do my damnedest to pay tribute. I'll be honored."

Drew signals the end of the interview, but I absolutely must find out more about Corsair. Jo's deal with Steven was off the books, but a third party might be involved. Twenty-five years with a businessman taught me a few tricks.

"Drew, since Corsair employees will attend the service, how about a word on Steven as a coworker? Shouldn't someone commemorate him as a financial analyst? Who could present that message? Someone on the list here?" I reach for the envelope.

"No, not those names." He shakes his head. "Best not to stir up old trouble over employee favoritism. I'll do it. Let me take the usual flak as the founder's son. I can fold in some tributes to Steve's work." His jaws work the gum. "Suppose I say this Steve was the hub of my operation here at Corsair."

"Hub? That's impressive."

Drew's voice becomes low and intense. "A special group of our investors swore by Steve Damelin. If he was high on a company and posted a buy, then our clients made money. Steve wasn't a celebrity analyst. You never saw him on TV. But in his low-key way, he was a star. We're reassigning his clients, but Steve's irreplaceable.

"Forgive me if I sound like a promo video, Ms. Carter. I don't want Steve's memory tarnished by anybody thinking darker thoughts. You're thinking, What dark thoughts? Right? Rivalries. Jealousies. Not every broker here relied on Steve's work. Some were scared. A few made remarks about Steve seeing daylight through cracks in the wall—"

"What wall?"

"The Chinese wall."

Chapter Twenty-seven

Chinese wall." My palms flare with sweat. "What Chinese wall?"

His smile curls with condescension. "It's a Wall Street saying. It's about security precautions."

"Why Chinese?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. It's just a term. It's so nobody can profit from insider information about deals, like mergers or hot new products. The way it works, the investment bankers are kept separate from the traders in a firm. The Chinese wall—in practical terms, it means separate computer servers, paper shredders, even segregated trash pickups. And totally different staff."

"Makes perfect sense." I manage to say, though my ears ring with the one word ricocheting inside my head. *Chinese. Chinese. Chinese.* The Great Wall of my apartment door if I ever learn what the blood marks mean. "Pull yourself together, Reggie. "So you're saying that Steven's success as an analyst prompted suspicion that he breached the Chinese wall."

'Had access to insider information so that traders could recommend stocks almost certain to gain sharply. This would be a felony. People go to prison for insider trading. The NASD monitors us. That's the National Association of Securities Dealers. They're our watchdog group. And the rules are tightening. It's high time. Too many analysts have been working for themselves, not their clients. A few can spoil it for everybody else.

"So enforcement is increasing."

'Breach that wall, heavy hitters come after you, district attorneys, the Justice Department. That's why I don't want anybody in a church pew to start thinking about shoptalk rumors in the middle of the service for Steve."

This is my now-or-never moment to show Drew the scrawled sheet from the mantel. I hold back, however, because there's contradiction in the air. Drew describes two opposing Steven Damelins—the beloved Wise Counselor and the Envied Hotshot Analyst. He makes no effort to bridge the two but eyes the envelope now going into my purse, the envelope prepared for me. "No need to list a list for somebody to speak about Steve's work, Ms. Cutter. I'll do it. I'll find the way." We rise, shake hands. He escorts me to the door with the practiced touch of a gentleman.

Which of the names on Andrew Vogler's list would volunteer information about Steven and the Chinese wall? Whipsawed on a subway seat, I note Justin Arveny of Wakefield, Melanie Brack-tip of Medford, Bailey Crissenforker of Somerville [illegible] and on down to Zannocki, Roland R., on Beacon Street here in Boston.

Do these Corsair coworkers have bits of information that could be pieced together to help solve Steven's murder? Would they provide useful information—or merely leap to squeeze the juice

of sour grapes? Corsair gossip says that the landlady found Steven's body, so somebody knows my name.

Is the killer on these mailing labels?

Or am I making too much of office jealousy? Drew Vogler couldn't have been nicer.

Resist courtesy's seductions, Reggie. Andrew spoke under pressure, manners don't guarantee candor, and a coat and tie can camouflage a killer. Face this: it's possible that I just talked to Steven's murderer on the seventeenth floor of a Boston office high-rise.

Is everybody but my dog a suspect? Back home, Biscuit jumps to greet me and trots to the fireplace hearth where Leonard Vogler's applewood is neatly stacked. Vogler yet again. Biscuit, I ought to make a roaring autumn fire and burn the Vogler wood to ashes." Odd, the wood makes a soft crackling right now. Biscuit sniffs and paws it. Probably it's still drying.

Come on, girl, we're going for a walk. We're going to fax a list to Detective Maglia and stop at Tsakis Brothers. You get a cookie, and I'll get a take-out dinner. In fact, I'll get a few minutes with Art and George, a friendly few minutes of genuine neighborhood warmth.

You take grapefruits, Mees Reggie. Sweet as honey, fresh today from Texas. And a chicken. We cook the chicken for you. Biscuit, you have extra cookie, yes?"

Yes. Back home by five with the grocery bag. I'm in the foyer fumbling with my keys when I notice a small brown-wrapped package. A piece of mail I've missed? It's addressed to me, with no return address. Statue of Liberty stamps march in a line, but I see no cancellation mark. With the groceries put away, I slit the wrapper and find a little bright yellow paperback, *The Word-Lover's Survival Vocabulary Handbook*. This book's been everywhere in stores

these past few years. It's now a series. Flip it over. The back cover lists the contents:

- "How to Fend off a Shark"
- "How to Jump from a Moving Car"
- "How to Identify a Bomb"
- "How to Survive If Your Parachute Fails to Open"

A cute novelty book. Fan the pages — there's no card, just plenty of illustrations. On one page, a man sinks in quicksand. In another, he flees a swarm of killer bees. In a third, an automobile nears a pool of water with live electrical power lines. "How to Escape from a Mountain Lion." "How to Win a Sword Fight." "How to Avoid Being Struck by Lightning."

Who sent it? One of my old Chicago friends dispatching a gag gift? Doubtful. Molly or Jack? No, for a variety of reasons, not my kids. Marty? Forget it, my ex would slap me with a lien, not a book.

Stark? —not a man to throw away money for novelties.

In moments, the list is exhausted. Then I see it, the torn-off notepaper tucked inside. It says: "You're going to need this." The words are cut out and glued on, a little crooked. There's no signature and no initials. "You're going to need this." I raise it to my nose and sniff. Odorless. Turn it over. Glue has puckered the paper. I flip through the book some more. "How to Escape from a Sinking Car." "How to Survive Adrift at Sea."

I'm at sea. My neck is warm, palms damp. A bad joke at the end of a long day, that's what it is. In bad taste. Cruel.

Unless it's not a joke. Then what? At my feet, Biscuit looks up and whines. I reach down to scratch her head. The thermostat is at seventy, but I shiver.

You're going to need

I walk to the windows.

going to need

Outside a neighbor comes from her car with a stadium cushion and blanket

need this.

I go room to room, patrol the apartment, clutch the book. Is it a threat to warn or terrorize me? Of course, it's caught me off guard, rattled me. But whoever sent this "worst case scenario" doesn't know whom they're dealing with. A survivor can use a survival guide. I won't flinch, I'll use it. Damn right I will. "How to Survive an Avalanche." "Survive [illegible] in the Line of Gunfire." I won't buckle. I'll read it cover-to-cover on high alert. I'll be ready. I'll be waiting.

Chapter Twenty-eight

No joke, Mom. It means corpse or death trap or—get this—pineapple."

"You're telling me the blood marks on my—on Steven Damelin's upstairs door are Chinese characters for Hawaiian fruit, or else corpse or a death trap, which sounds just right for a murder victim's door, don't you think?" Tom's sorry for the delay. He says people disagree about the characters because handwriting can be messy. Think of Jack's scrawl.

"He's not Chinese. We're not Chi—"

Mom, are you having a low watt day? I'll mail you back the photo. Stay safe. Jack and I worry about you.

Molly, tell your brother I got a survival guide yesterday. I can jump from a moving car or wrestle an alligator or outwit a bear. Bye for now."

Exhale. Reggie. Shield your children from fears for your safety. Shield yourself too. A bloody door and nosy gag gift do not constitute bodily harm—yet. Perhaps it's only a prank. And the car

that ran me down, was that a prank? Stark is outside exercising Biscuit, but so far, the handbook cam-note is my secret. It might have come from that kid, the messenger dispatched by Alex Ribideau. Or any member of the Vogler Comber clan. Is mother Eleanor in league with son Drew?

Or how about cabbie Charlie Dameron, furious when Steven denied him financing for the Hummer hearse, then newly angry at the nosy Boston landlady? Doubtful, yes, but not out of the question. Surely it couldn't be Luis Diaz. The handbook's too cunning. Of course, it could be from an unknown assailant that four cylinder cop term for "not a clue." Maybe it's somebody Steven picked up, dated briefly and fatally - but not before learning about Helping Hand and the link to the occupant of the lower floor of 27 Barlow Square.

What is, or was, Helping Hand? Its Steven's connection to Jo and to my bloody door. What kind of business? The bright morning sunlight mocks the grinding in my stomach. If only the *Survival Handbook* taught how to breach or scale a Chinese wall. Or explained how a man can suffer multiple stab wounds and be nailed like upholstery to a hardwood floor - and yet drown.

Or why.

Neither Magda nor Devaney has notified me of an arrest in the case. Nor hinted at the identity of the prime suspect or suspects. There's nothing about arrests on TV or in the *Globe*.

My best strategy is the memorial service. As planner I can get more names and probe Steven's other relationships. Trudy Phaelz saw him at curbside in the early a.m. with luggage. Where did he go?

Reverend Welch? This is Reggie Carter. Fine, thanks. I'm calling to set the date for the service for Steven Dameron. The minister suggests the Wednesday before Veterans Day weekend. An ecumenical service, we agree.

"Our church reception room is available for refreshments too And, Reggie, won't you plan to say a few words in the spirit of your Aunt Jo? The staff from the Big Buddies program will surely attend And young Luis Diaz perhaps he'll speak too"

"Perhaps he will, Reverend Welch, if he's free"

"All Souls would love to see you, Reggie It's my pitch for the spirit —when the Lord isn't calling me to get bids from rooters Stay in touch."

Stark's still out with Biscuit, so I call Margaret Vogler, who assures me that Corsair Financial will underwrite the memorial service reception It's revealing the Voglers won't spend a dime of their own money, the service will be a tax write-off for Corsair Margaret launches a heart to heart on tea sandwiches and little tarts Petits fours, Regina, but no marzipan"

"Perhaps a sauterne, Margaret, and a zinfandel Would I mind phoning a caterer? Not a bit.

In moments, I'm on the phone to Mimi's Kitchen Rather short notice I agree, with accents of Bette Davis for urgency Please invoice Mr Leonard Vogler, Corsair Financial" When he sees the bill, may Vogler gargle Zoloft with his bourbon

Here's Stark with an exhausted Biscuit who flops on the kitchen floor while the man gulps his sugared coffee It smells like a training room in here, Cutter Like ointment for sore muscles

I went horseback riding a couple days ago

"The best saddles on a Harley You'd find out Hey, what's this *Worst Case Scenario Survival Handbook* How to Ram a Car 'How to Win a Sword Fight This some kind of joke?

"It just showed up."

"Unannounced?"

"On my doorstep."

He grunts eyes narrowed to slits Whatever you say, Cutter But you better keep Biscuit here with you for a while longer

Meaning that I need a watchdog on constant duty. As if the *Survival Handbook* doesn't remind me. We move toward my front door. That crackling sound again. "Hey, what's that noise?" Stark stares at the crackling wood. "Where'd you get this?"

"It's a gift, applewood—"

"Cutter, you got borers. Apple borers, worse than termites. You can hear them. They'll eat your house." He grabs the armful. "Get this junk out of here right now. Open the door." Stark dumps all the wood and promises to move the sofa in a few days. He dusts his hands. "Some presents you get."

"Some givers. Stark, does the name Helping Hand mean anything to you?"

"A charity?"

"A business. Something that Jo was into with Steven."

"It doesn't sound like her."

"No, it doesn't."

"Helping Hand, you're sure that's it?"

"Pretty sure. You didn't notice the name when we moved Steven's furniture? Anything in the drawers of the blue chest?"

"No. Ask your cop friends. They got the first round of the search."

He's at the door. "One last thing, Stark. You took Massachusetts state history as a schoolkid, right?"

"Before I dropped out? What do you want to know—Paul Revere, the Pilgrims?"

"There was a textile strike in Lawrence. It was in 1912."

He snorts. "Suppose there yes. Talk about landmarks for the working stiffs."

"You know about it? Tell me."

"I don't remember details, but it was the usual crap, the mill town owners calling all the shots. They got rich. But they went too far. They pushed the workers' hours and cut their wages,

both at the same time, talk about sweatshops. The workers were trapped. They were immigrants from all over, you know, 'Give me your tired, your poor.' They had big families, nobody spoke much English. The thing is, the workers got fed up and walked out of the mills. And stayed out. The governor called out the militia, but the strikers held out. It was winter, cold as a witch's ass. They stuck it out. And they won."

"What do you mean 'won'?"

"Higher wages, better hours."

'And it's a well-known event in state history?'

"In national history, Cutter. It was a big media event. Reporters came from everywhere. Workers shipped their kids out of Lawrence for fear the militia'd shoot or bayonet them. The whole country was rooting for the mill families. It was a PR disaster for the owners. The workers' deal was to earn a decent living and the owners respect. The women were really into it. The workers beat the owners. That's why the nickname."

"What nickname?"

"For respect and enough to eat—that's why it's named for the bread and the roses."

"Bread? What roses?"

"The Bread and Roses Strike. It's famous."

Stark leaves, but I'm frozen in place, staring at the pale green glass on the top shelf of my front room QUART gleams in the late morning light. Bread and roses, and whiskey and cabbage too. The voices I heard—they're Lawrence mill workers, strikers. The cabbage, it was cooking in a kitchen—a kitchen bar. The whiskey was Blanchard & Farrar, Dock Square, Boston. In my hands—as in Jo's—the foreign voices rise in anger and hope. The whiskey was poured, I now know for certain, in the kitchen bar of the Dame inski family. I heard the voices of workers who

came after their shifts to drink and to commiserate and then organize. To plan their walkout. They were fearful and hopeful, desperate, maybe drunk. The crack on the head—somebody grabbed the empty flask as a cudgel. Does the spirit of that person linger in the perpetuity of the kitchen bar, compelled forever to grab the flask and wield it like a weapon?

Did Steven know this Damelinski family history? It's doubtful. Stories get lost. Family members aren't interested. The flask gradually becomes just an old bottle around the house. An old bottle from the Lithuanian days.

From the "Slovak" days.

Is Steven's death connected to the 1912 Bread and Roses Strike? How? QUART seems to wink in the light, to beckon me. I refuse. No more blows to the skull, no thanks. Enough.

I call Devaney.

"Coincidence. Reggie, you were just on my mind. It happened like this many times with your aunt. How're you doing?"

"Okay, Frank, but here's a question: did the police search of Steven Damelin's things turn up a business called Helping Hand?"

"It sounds like not-for-profit."

"But it's a business. Or was. I think Jo was involved. I know she was."

"She never told me about it. But I'll check the inventory and get back to you. Anyway, Ed asked me to give you an update."

"Maglia has found Alex Ribideau?"

"Not as yet, no. At this time we're talking to Luis Diaz. We brought him in. He was in a car with three other kids. They had burglery tools and a nail gun. Just so you know."

"What brand, Frank? What make?"

"The car?"

"The nail gun."

"I don't know."

"Frank, listen to this: the business that Steven Damelin worked for—the CEO's wife's family makes nail guns."

"Reggie, that's a stretch."

"It's a lead."

"Reggie, consider the logic. If we arrest a guy in a Mustang, do we question Mr. and Mrs. Ford? No, we do not. You're stressing yourself."

"You think Luis killed Steven?"

"Maybe he went to Damelin's apartment the night of the murder. Ed's working on it. Whatever you're up to, Reggie, it sounds far-fetched. Ease off."

Ease? Do I tell about the *Survival Handbook* just when he thinks I'm already half daft? Do I remind him that a car ran me down on my own street the day before Steven was murdered? "I'm planning a memorial service, Frank. I'm gathering a list of invitees and plan to contact a young woman who'll sing. I'll spend the afternoon on the invitations. I'll brew a pot of tea."

"Good, Reggie. That sounds real good. You take care."

It's after 5:00 p.m. when I reach the Apollo Club. There's no sign of Matt Kitchel. Today's bartender is round faced, his brass yellow hair slicked and gleaming. He knows nothing of Matt's schedule. The after work crowd gathers. A threesome in jerseys at the bar subtly barricade themselves as I take a stool at this end, decline today's special, metropolitans, and order a glass of merlot, water on the side.

Fifteen minutes pass, twenty. At 5:50, a second bartender comes on. More customers arrive, men with cut abs and six pack muscles. The salsa volume is up, the cocktail shaker in overdrive. "Refill?"

"No thanks. Could you check Matt Kitchel's schedule? Please."

"Don't know a thing about it. Sorry."

The tables are filling and the booths too. This could be a long evening. Although the stools on either side of me stay empty. No one wants to sit beside the sole female in the club, the Typhoid Mary of the Apollo Club. Here's a thought: the longer I sit, the bigger the drag on the club revenue. Excuse me, but if Matt's available, I'll be in that second booth. I'm taking my drink to the second booth — that one big empty booth. He can find me there. I'll be waiting."

Minutes later Matt Kitchel bursts through a back door near the waterfall and Matt lunges into the booth across from me. "I'm trying to run a business here. People need to sit down. What do you want this time?"

"I'm in charge of the memorial service for Steven Damelin. It'll be at All Souls Church a few days before Veterans Day. Here, let me—" I take out an invitation, which he puts aside without a glance. "Mr. Kitchel — Matt — could you provide a list of names of Steven's friends?"

"Look, lady—"

"It's Reggie. Reggie Cutter."

"Ms. Cutter, maybe you need a hearing test. You didn't listen last time, so here's the message: the Apollo Club isn't interested in giving out lists of names. Not for Steve's funeral, not for a memorial service. Anyway, who's behind it? Not his scummy family."

It's an occasion for friends and his coworkers surely care. "Andrew Vogler of Corsair Financial told me—"

"Corsair Fraudancial. You heard me. *Fraud*ancial."

"You're accusing the firm of—"

"Accusing nobody of nothing. It was one heck of a party for a

while Weekends in Vegas, coke, and Beemers. You didn't know? One New Year's, they all went to Rio. It was fun for all the boys and girls, but the party had to end. No bang, big whimper. Corsair's a bucket shop. Look it up."

"Investments pose risks—"

How pious. Put you on the *Wall Street* channel. He scowls. "Lady, you come into my club with your memorial plans, you better know who's singing the hymns."

Matt, my aunt was in business with Steven. I need to know more about it. Helping Hand. Did Steven talk about Helping Hand?"

He gazes at the room. There's laughter and music and a good time being had by all. "Steve wanted to go out on his own."

"To leave Corsair?"

"To check the box that says self-employed."

"But you never heard of Helping Hand?"

He shakes his head. "I gotta go."

Matt, one last thing. There's a dancer named Alex Ribideau. He was Steven's partner, as I'm sure you know. You probably know the police are looking for him. I met him."

"Good for you."

"Maybe Alex knows about the Helping Hand business. He's disappeared."

So they say. He stands and looms over me. "You found Steve's body, right?"

"That's right."

And where were you the night he died, Miss Reggie?

"I was in my apartment."

"What did you hear that night?"

Nothing. A few sounds. The walls are thick.

But the police aren't closing in on you, are they? He leans closer to my face. How would you like it if I stopped sat outside

your dance studio at all hours of the day and night? How would you like to see cops at your apartment round the clock?

"Me? I'd feel safer."

His bark laugh is all sarcasm. "Well, it's relative, isn't it?

You still think the Latino boy—Luis—killed Steven?"

"You bet I do. But a gay passion murder sells. The cops get promoted, the DA runs for attorney general and governor. Isn't that how it goes? I gotta get back to work. Have a nice memorial service."

I'm walking alone toward the club door as voices fall silent. Of course, it's the woman, the alien female, and my mind a jumble. But head up, Reggie. Let them stare.

But the quiet, I realize, is not for me but two uniformed police. It's not gender but blues, a man and woman making their way down the bar.

"—haven't seen him."

"No."

"Afraid not."

Heads are shaking.

The female cop's voice is stern. "We understand he may frequent this club."

They're talking to the slick-haired bartender. They show a photograph.

"—haven't seen him."

I'm by the door.

"Haven't seen him this week."

"Last month."

I hear the words "missing" "for questioning" "looking for" and see the photograph flash as I myself am asked.

"No." I shake my head. "Haven't seen him."

I exit the Apollo Club with sinking heart. The cops have shown me a photograph of Alex Ribideau.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Back home, with Biscuit fed and walked, I grab a yogurt open my laptop, take a deep breath, and type in "Corsair Financial."

Its logo, a white station, rears against a drapery of royal blue and gold, and the home page shows Leonard in profile in a bespoke suit. He's holding a portfolio and tortoiseshell readers and stands like a pillar of financial wisdom by a window overlooking Boston Harbor. The words "Investment, Security, Estate Planning" ripple across the bottom.

Color portrait photos of brokers and analysts appear under "Corsair's Expert Professionals." Here's Drew, a young "Rock of Gibraltar." And Steven too, his face friendly but gaze piercing, as if scanning the sea for galleons full of ill gotts. Either the webmaster hasn't updated the site, or no one can bear to face the task of removing the murdered analyst. What about his clients? Drew said they were parceled out to others. Including him? Corsair

promises the utmost in financial services. Professional care of our clients, our sacred trust."

But "trust" means fines and court judgments. A few clicks verify Matt Kitchel's scathing words. Corsair has been penalized for "hype and dump manipulation" involving the promotion of stock through false and misleading statements.

What kind of statements? The promotion and manipulation of microcap stocks of two companies, Ferrero Electronics and Aavido Inc., both with subpar capitalization. The time was $1.5 million.

Question to self: what is a microcap stock?

I move on to find that judgment rendered against Defendants Leonard S. Vogler and Andrew T. Vogler of Corsair Financial last February 5 by the Honorable Dore R. Vandevere, Judge in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Massachusetts.

My eyes glaze at the sections and subsections of securities trust laws violated, but the judge's words are shocking: aiding and abetting "knowingly and recklessly failed to properly recognize" attempt to conceal "creation of false supporting documentation." The parties consent to the final judgment without admitting or denying the allegations. The penalty: $85 million. The bottom line: fraud.

Ready to shut the laptop. I try one more search: the National Association of Securities Dealers. Here's the mark. Investors meaning penalties? Click.

The first impression: fines and suspensions galore. The whole industry a nest of crooks. But experts are everywhere. Dubuque. Miami. Rochester. Sanctions. Offers of settlement, censure, more censure. It's fascinating, worth hours. I'm looking for Corsair Financial, Charles Vogler or Andrew.

Instead, I find Steven Damelin.

On-screen before me is Steven, Registered Representative of Corsair Financial. Here is Steven's name among the securities extortionists and defrauders. In January of this year, the NASD fined him $25,000 and suspended him for a month for findings that he engaged in private transactions without prior written notice to, and approval from, his member firm.

Private transactions, meaning Steven was caught doing deals on the side. Jo's deal? Helping Hand — was it a microcap stock? Click a few more times, and I learn that these are companies so small they're not traded on exchanges. They're not registered with the SEC. No public reports on them are required. Or available. There's no trace of Helping Hand.

Try to think this through, Reggie. Suppose the fine is a fraction of the infraction. On screen I see fines of $5,000 and no suspensions. Slaps on the wrist. Steven's $25,000 was a rear punch.

Did he do private deals from his home? Did the fine put a stop to it, or was my upstairs that his new boiler room? Suppose the Corsair sheet found by the Right True Clean guys behind the mantel wasn't merely scratch paper but a file on microcaps that Steven was still peddling to victims.

Peddling them to Jo? Was that his deal with my aunt? It's hard to believe. Jo was careful with her money. Her altruism was not foolhardy. She was an activist but not a spendthrift, and certainly not greedy. She'd be the last person tempted to invest in stocks unregistered and not listed on an exchange.

I dash, nevertheless, to my lingerie drawer and pull out the sheet of scrawled letters and numbers. This looks like Steven's writing, based on the signatures on the rent and security deposit checks. But there's no HH for Helping Hand. Maggie has the original of this sheet and has said nothing about its importance — not that he'd tell me. Suppose Steven coded his private

transactions' but was murdered in connection with them, paying the ultimate "fine."

That friendly young man. Deadly dangerous man? Somehow I recall his sister Crystal's memory of her brother confessing feelings of alienation from the new life the Voglers afforded him. Crystal said he felt *in*, but not *of*, the world of the Vogler family. Did he commit financial crimes to spite them? Or did he try to 'earn' his way in with crooked deals to make him a player instead of a charity case? Either way, suppose he operated through a crack in the Chinese wall, then was exposed and dreaded further exposure. Maybe that's why he tried to block my call to the police when that car ran me down. He ping Hand could be the link to the blood marks on my door.

'Meg, it's Reggie. Hope I'm not calling too late. I need a favor."

'Realtors and doctors. Reg, we're both on call. What's up?'

'I need Steven Dameron's last known address. Is his sublet file in your office?' Here goes a white lie. "His previous landlord and possibly his neighbors, ought to be included on the memorial service guest list. Do you happen to remember where he lived?"

I'm thinking Roslindale or Hyde Park. Can this wait 'til morning?"

It's not easy, but I say yes.

"Take heart, Reggie. Your soon-to-be tenant, Mackenzie Carruthers, has a sterling credit rating. You should have no problems."

"No problems, what a notion."

It's 9:23 a.m., chill and overcast, when I set out for 1432 Deary Street in the Hyde Park section of Boston. Steven's previous landlady, Meg tells me, is Alice (Mrs. Harold) Comer, who

also provided a reference for the sublet. The phone number listed for H. Collier on Deary Street, however, is no longer in service.

Number 1452 Deary is an asphalt shingle two flights up concrete steps on a block of duplexes and foursquare single-family homes with in-law apartments. The Chevy in front has a Florida plate that says "Seminole County," and the woman who answers the bell is fiftyish, with short apricot hair and a tight mouth. We had frost last night, but she's wearing shorts and a green tube top under a windbreaker and seems breathless and impatient. "What is it?"

"Mrs. Collier? I'm Reggie—"

"She's not here." Behind the open door, I see stacked cartons.

"I would have phoned, but the number for H. Collier isn't—

"It was disconnected last month." Her voice is clipped, definitely New England. She holds a roll of packing tape.

"Can you tell me where I can reach Mrs. Collier?"

"She moved out." Indeed the space behind the woman looks bare. I see a rolled rug.

"Do you have a forwarding address? I need information about a man who lived here—a tenant."

"The back apartment is empty."

"I mean a previous tenant, a man named Steven Damelin."

She fixes me with a hard stare. Her eyes lasers.

"Do you know him? Did you know Mr. Damelin?"

The lasers lock on my face, and her voice is tempered steel. She yanks the tube top and zips the jacket. "We got nothing to say on that."

"It's important."

"Nothing to say."

Just then a U-Haul truck pulls up at the curb, and a bronzed young man—a kid—in jeans and a hooded sweat springs out and

jumps the stairs two at a time. The woman says, 'That's the last stack, Jamie. Take it to Grandma's. For godsake, don't drop it.'

'How 'bout the rest?' His voice is a southern drawl.

'The rest, we'll figure it out.' To me, she snaps, 'Can't you see we're busy?' She whirls and retreats as the kid hoists two cartons and starts out past me.

"If you—"

"I said we're busy." She slams the door.

I skip down the steps behind Jamie and peer over his shoulder to see any markings on the carton flaps, but lean so far forward that I stumble. "Oops."

"You okay, ma'am?"

That drawl. "Yes, thanks." But he turns, his shoulder blocking my sight line. If the cartons are addressed to someone—to Alice Collier? I can't tell. He shoves them into the truck, shuts the doors, jumps into the cab, and starts the engine. The side of the U-Haul sports a leaping dolphin. If the cartons are bound for delivery to 'Grandma,' a.k.a. Mrs. Harold Collier, I'm a fool not to follow.

That is, if I'm not too late. The streets around Deary are a maze. In the Beetle, I turn and turn again. No U-Hauls in sight. Think, Reggie. Pause and think. If the kid's visiting from Florida, he probably doesn't know his way around. He'll take main roads and avoid neighborhood shortcuts, especially in the bulky truck. That means I-95 or the Truman Highway, or maybe Blue Hill Avenue. What's the likely connector? Focus, Reggie. You came in on—Metropolitan. That's it, Metropolitan.

Yes, it's him—far down on the right on Metropolitan and heading southeast to—Blue Hill. Turning right, I floor it, tail gate behind an SUV, then spurt past and cut in too soon. Horns blast. Cool it, Reggie, or you'll end up with a faceful of air bag. I overtake Jamie just as the U-Haul exits onto Route 128. He's

going over seventy in the left lane, then cuts to exit south on Route 24, the AmVets Highway.

I barely make the exit. The Beetle surges, but I brake too hard on the ramp and feel the rear end of my car pull. Speeding, Jamie also oversteers. At highway speed, the U-Haul weaves in its lane like a ribbon of rickrack. I keep three or four car lengths behind past exit signs for Randolph and Stoughton, then Avon. We've gone seven, nearly eight miles. A sign says we're now in Plymouth County. Without signaling, Jamie crosses a lane, exits, and heads east on the the Reynolds Memorial Highway. We're in the city of Brockton.

It's hell to keep up. The U-Haul twists and turns past a mall, a golf course, houses, a pond, a cemetery, two schools, and at last a looping roadway that leads to a brick complex occupying two full blocks. Jamie pulls into the entrance with a sign that says "Silver Ridge Village." It's vaguely colonial, with chunky white pillars and squat cornices that need a fresh coat of paint. The U-Haul stops at the miniature colonial gatehouse, and Jamie leans out to talk to the uniformed guard who lifts the cross gate to let him inside.

The gate lowers. What to do? Try talking my way in? Not while Jamie's inside. If Alice Collier proves to be Grandma,' I want to see her by myself. So I park about two hundred yards from the entrance and wait. It's 11:47 a.m., the temperature climbing into the high thirties. On the brown grass border, a squirrel noses in the dirt, while two workmen pull up frost-killed begonias. A few dead weeds poke along the roofline gutters, and some of the window screens are broken.

At 12:02 p.m. the U-Haul with the diving dolphins pulls out. Having unloaded the cartons, Jamie will now return to Deary Street. Reggie Carter, however, will head for Barlow Square for on-line research. By 1:30 I've walked Biscuit, played

fetch with her, refreshed her water, and grabbed a sandwich. It's time for a prep session on Silver Ridge Village. Alice Collier may be a slim lead, but right now she's the best I've got. Handle with care.

Silver Ridge, according to the miracle of Google, is a branded, franchised senior living residence. It features assisted living, Alzheimer's care, nursing, and short-term stays in eight states east of the Mississippi. The text is what you'd expect: home values, meet loved ones' challenges, compassion, expertise, apartment-style living, homelike landscaped gardens, cuisine, attentive, trained staff. The photos show pink-cheeked, bright-eyed seniors with all their mental marbles intact. They're spry. They've got gumption. Nary a wheelchair nor walker is in sight.

The clock hits 2:00 p.m. when Ms. Elaine Scarbino identifies herself on the phone as assistant manager of Silver Ridge's Garden Court unit where Alice Collier resides. According to the Web site, the Garden Court unit means assisted living, so Alice's mind ought to be clear.

"You say you're a family friend, Ms. Cridder?"

"Cutter, Ms. Scarbino. Yes, and a friend of a former tenant of hers. From one day to the next, we don't know what's in store as the years go by, do we?"

"How very true that is."

"I'm eager to visit Alice. I didn't grasp the new situation until I spoke with her grandson, Jamie. How's she doing? I mean, from a professional viewpoint."

"It's always an adjustment, but her spirits are higher since we moved her up from the Gladstone unit."

Gladstone—according to the Web site, that's nursing care. "So she's improving?"

"The cast is off. The leg hasn't healed as quickly as we'd like,

but everyone's hopeful now that the dementia has lessened. It was quite a fall, and a serious concussion."

"Perhaps you could tell me when I might drop by. I'd like to surprise Alice, but not tire her. Perhaps I could stop in between the family's visits—say later today? Tomorrow? At ten? And you'll give my name to the gatehouse staff. Thanks much."

Arriving at 9:30 a.m. the next day with a gift basket, I scan the parking lot and see no U-Haul. Of three vehicles with Florida plates, none are Chevies and none are from Seminole County. Good.

Elaine Scarbino greets me in a checkered suit and patent pumps. She's a perky brunet of about forty, with cherry lipstick and a heavy layer of rose blush. Her lilac perfume blends with institutional odors of disinfectant. She admires the gift basket and leads the way across a lobby paneled with the dark wood popular back in the 1970s. We cross a waxed linoleum floor meant to look like slate. Puce silk hydrangeas flare in plastic pots against one wall, and the tiles of the low ceiling are edged with brown water stains.

"You're the first visitor of the day. Won't you please sign our registry?" I nod at the desk attendant and sign in. "No Colliers have visited so far this morning, though a James Farr signed under yesterday's date. I think I see Jamie's name. James Farr?"

"Oh, that boy's worked nonstop with his mom's nice they drove up from Florida to clear out the family house. He brought down mementos from Alice's home yesterday. We encourage personal decorative touches, you see, even though it's troublesome for our housekeeping staff. Silver Ridge puts the resident first. It's our hallmark. Woodie dear, would you phone Mrs. Colliers apartment? She has a visitor."

In moments, I'm ushered into a small, cramped apartment, where a plump woman in a pink sweat suit sits in a tan recliner

with her left leg propped on a stool beside two open cardboard cartons. I'd guess Alice Collier is in her late seventies. Her face is fleshy, her complexion gray, and her watery blue eyes strain to recognize my features.

Alice . . . Alice Collier, I'm Reggie Cutter. May I sit down? I've brought you a basket. How are you feeling today?" I raise my voice over a blast of hot air from a register vent.

"You . . . you're the basket lady."

"Well . . . yes, I am." I pull up a side chair.

"Any Milky Ways in there? Take off the cellophane so I can see." She fingers the nectarines, the cheese crackers and nuts. "I like chocolate with nougat. How about Three Musketeers?"

"How about these cookies instead?" I open the packet of soft chocolate cookies, and she grabs and bites in.

They don't feed us right. There's no sweets, and you can't get cream sherry. My home always had cream sherry. I had a large home in Hyde Park, number 1452 Deary Street. If my Harold was alive, this wouldn't happen. Not in a thousand years. The thing is, you climb the same set of stairs every day for forty years, then one morning . . . I hit my head. They think my mind isn't right. Well, they're wrong. See that box? Reach in and help unwrap for me."

I do. Inside the Bubble Wrap is a Hummel angel playing the clarinet.

"Put it on the table. I collect Hummels. Where's the rest? My daughter wants me to sell them. They're the only valuables left."

"From your home?"

From all the years. Save, save, save. What did it get me in the end? My daughter says I'm a fool." Cookie crumbs tumble into her lap, and her free slippered foot thumps the thin tweed carpet. Alice cocks her head. "I don't think this place is nice, do you?"

"Silver Ridge?"

"They tell me it's nice. I say it's a dump. And everything's gone. Gone." She chews another cookie, pinches crumbs from her lap, and eats them. Do I ask point-blank about Steven or let her ramble on and hope to glean something?

Or could the basket lady try a third way? "Alice," I say slowly, "sometimes in life a person needs a helping hand."

She suddenly stops as still as a statue. "What's that you just said?"

"I said sometimes—"

"Helping hand. You said helping hand."

"I did."

Her agitation rises. "What do you know about it? Did you give him money too?"

"Give who money?"

"Don't play bashful. You know who."

"Was it your tenant, Steven?"

"Stevie. Like a second grandson."

"He lived in your apartment, didn't he?"

"Four years last March, sweet as a little prince. Of course, he traveled. Business, always business. That's when he called about Helping Hand. We talked about it on the phone."

"When he was traveling?"

"His phone calls kept me company. 'I'm checking in, Alice.' That's what he said. He stayed in touch. You know that slogan 'Reach out and touch someone'?"

"Where did he call from?"

"From wherever he was."

"Where did he go?"

"In taxis. Sometimes a week at a time. Sometimes a couple of days."

"Alice, did you see the taxis?"

'That's a funny question. What else is in that basket?'

"How about a nectarine?"

"I can't chew nuts. They're hard on my teeth."

"How about lemon drops? Can you suck a lemon drop?" I open the decorator tin and set it beside her. "About the taxis, did any of them say 'Charlie's Cab'?"

'How would I know? I'm no snoop. Did he put you in the movie?"

"What movie?"

"He put me in. They came with a camera and bright lights and it took all day. They dolled me up and stayed for lunch. We ate sandwiches on the back porch. I never got to see the movie."

"What was it about?"

She pops two lemon drops. "Make believe. Pretending to pay my bills."

"Which bills?"

"These are too sour. Where's a tissue?" I hand her a Kleenex, and she spits out the candy. "I don't know why they're so stingy with sugar."

"What particular bills, Alice?"

'Everything. They covered my kitchen table with Verizon, New England Electric, the water bill, credit cards, Fritenes. There wasn't room to sit down and eat. That's why the back porch lunch."

"Was there a script? Did you say lines?"

'It was a silent movie. That was the joke. They sat me down at the table and put a pen in my hand and ran the camera."

"What did Steven say?"

'He said the movie would help the return on my investment. As it was, I was happy. The money poured in. Jamie's college money was set, and I promised my daughter a new car. And the

bathroom magazines that show those new jet tubs . every color in the rainbow I had my eye on turquoise

'You invested? You gave Steven your money?

"A wonderful company, Helping Hand for the sick, the old, everybody You can't get a live person on the phone nowadays, it's 'pound' this and 'star' that You talk to machines, and you can't set your own timer on the IV. Jar ads, they won't budge Helping Hand, it was a dream come true, real people to lend a hand. It was better than the stock market."

"Helping Hand is a private company?"

"Every investor was guaranteed a big return The checks came like clockwork I reinvested Stevie said to make money, invest all you can Finally I said Stevie, I gave you every dollar I've got Where on earth would I get more money to invest, and he said Alice, dear, the house, the house So he helped me get the new mortgage and promised to take care of everything."

"And what happened?"

Her watery blue gaze hardens "My crab apple tree was full of blossoms when the money stopped That's what I remember The backyard was full of pink spring blossoms Then the checks from Helping Hand quit He said it was temporary Be patient Stevie said, Rome wasn't built in a day I was patient, I didn't complain Now here I am in this dump with my leg and the Hummers, and my daughter's mad because I wouldn't move to Florida

She says none of this would have happened if I moved after my husband passed away But I'm not crazy about her hair It's orange I told her it looks sun kissed Get it, Sunkist? That made her even madder Ruth never could take a joke Jamie, now, he's different He's good in school He wants to go to college, but the money's gone That's why I need sleeping pills That's the crime Her blue eyes focus somewhere deep inside, and her voice softens My grandson's future that's the crime."

I pause. The furnace blasts. Alice wipes a tear. Yes, this is crime in more ways than Harold Colliers widow possibly knows. How many clients got burned along the way? How many out there never made their peace with Steven's scams and weren't safely stowed in a nursing home with a broken leg and fractured spirit?

Suppose just one victim smoldered inside until rage reached a murderous flash point.

Or did an insider get too scared or furious?

Or too greedy?

Alice, did you meet Steven's friend Alex? Alex Ribideau? Her shrug could mean yes, no, or maybe. "Or perhaps Andrew—Drew Vogler?"

He had friends in and out. Nice young men. I wasn't strict about that as long as nobody made too much noise at night. I need my sleep."

"These were very special friends. Alex is dark-haired. He's athletic, a dancer." She nods, but her gaze is fading. "Andrew is tall and blond. He and Steven owned a horse together."

The horse, yes. Stevie carried a picture of it in his wallet.

"So you met Andrew?" I lean toward as if to charge her up.

She hesitates, perhaps collecting her thoughts. "Maybe he was in the wallet too."

"Or did you see a teen boy named Luis?"

"Louise?"

"Luis. Luis Diaz. He's Latino. Steven tried to help him."

"Sounds like a foreigner."

"He's in high school."

"They're taking over, you know. I'll tell you this."

"Tell me."

My neighbors got miffed when cars parked up and down the street. That's why Stevie shoveled the O'Learys out in winter.

And the Bollingers too." Alice crumples the tissue and licks her finger, her gaze wandering to my face. "You brought me a basket."

"I did."

"Next time, I want Three Musketeers."

"I'll remember."

"And cream sherry too. My Harold made sure there was cream sherry in the house. He said it was the mark of a respectable home."

Chapter Thirty

I'm in a McDonald's off the Stoughton exit. I have a Big Mac, fries, and a Coke, and it's all delicious, the special sauce, lettuce, and pickle and cheese, and the fries bathed in ketchup from a half dozen packets. My fingers are greasy, and I'm wolfing every bite. The icy Coke slides down my throat in fizzy perfection. Little kids are squealing and crawling like gerbils in the play pods, and construction workers are lined up six deep at the front. It's lunchtime, and I'm in time with heaven.

It lasts to the very last bite, till I've slid the wrappers and cup my tray toward the trash can and got a coffee to sip for ten minutes before the Beetle takes me on the last leg of the trip from the Brockton Silver Ridge Village to Barlow Square.

What I've found out from Alice Collier? That the financial bonanza moved her to sink every last dollar into Helping Hand and then try to mortgage her home—thanks to Steven Dameron's investment advice. In short, Alice was naked, beckoned, stroked,

and comforted by a hand that proceeded to choke the financial life out of her.

Helping Hand. The very phrase sounds neighborly. It would be irresistibly seductive to the Alice Colliers of the world who are bewildered by PIN, passwords, downloads, robot voices, and so-called customer service that's a joke. Imagine, investment in real, live personal services to provide aid and assistance with everything from fixing the toaster to straightening out those monthly Bank of America or Citi statements. Helping Hand, it sounds like a mix of the Red Cross and a valet. You wouldn't have to be gullible to invest, just stressed. And overwhelmed. And frightened by the demands of modernity.

Or idealistic? As idealistic as Josephine Cutter. No, my Aunt Jo was neither gullible nor greedy. But she was superaware of how others struggled, how thin their resources to help them. She was the world's greatest believer in public service assistance. But this is the age of privatizing. The balance long ago shifted to the market. That's what Steven pretended to offer: a private business whose mission was to help others. He could have persuaded Jo that, as an investor, her money supported a humane good. Ease in the era of the market. As for the promised investment returns, Steven could have shown Jo how she could help her niece and nephew and also donate money to any number of worthy causes, including the Roxbury clothing consignment shop that helped poor women get on their feet. Win-win-win.

So suppose Jo's deal with Steven was investment angled at philanthropy. His charm and the very name Helping Hand probably dulled her judgment just enough to fall for him into skipping background checks on the business and on its young entrepreneur. As sharp as she was, Jo could not resist the notion of helpful outreach. She took Steven's word. Her skeptic's switch was off.

But unlike Alice Collier, Jo got sick. My guess: she got herself

agnosis just at a point when Steven was ready to hit her up for major money, her pension, and the mortgage on the Barlow Square town house. Everything she had would be sucked into his scheme. Jo's illness aborted the plan. She was 'saved' by terminal cancer.

And I was saved. My home, my rental income, are the result of fateful timing. Had Steven lived, I too, might have been subjected to his pitch, this helpful and charming young man offering me a once in a lifetime opportunity to mortgage my inherited property to increase wealth while supporting my nearest and dearest. Would I have resisted? I like to think so. Can I say one hundred percent for sure? At this point in life total certainties are rare.

Steven Damelin, that charming young man. A con man. A crook. What did Matt Kitchen say? That Steven's goal was to check the box that says 'self employed.' A self-employed white-collar criminal: is that it? Is that the end point of the Damelinskis who toiled in the Lawrence mills and huddled in the kitchen bar of the Plains in the dead of winter to plan the strike for living wages and self-respect? Did the enterprising immigrant family who launched the kitchen bar get warped over the generations? Did their initiative turn corrupt, as if the very chromosomes broke down? In the twenty-first century, does it come down to financial crimes at Corsair and a side business in hot older women? Is that the American dream of today?

But how exactly did he operate? I go to the counter for a coffee refill and decide to sit for another few minutes then shut my eyes to picture the Derry Street house. Steven rented the back apartment, no doubt with its own private entrance. But it was close quarters and he could have taken work home often, person to person. A bottle of cream sherry would be a passport to her home any evening.

Yet Avis says he talked about Helping Hand on the phone.

when he traveled, that his phone calls kept her company. Did he simply keep her pacified while on the road? Did he check in with his various victims, coaxing, cajoling, issuing veiled threats as necessary to keep the checks coming? As attractive as he was in person, the suave Steven was perhaps especially effective on the phone, a disembodied voice. Maybe it was simply more efficient to make calls.

Somehow I remember the cell phones—old Motorolas and Nokias—when Stark and I moved furniture to my basement. I'd thought it was a touching sign of a techie guy infatuated with the latest models and happy to discard the old. At that moment, it reminded me of my son, Jack, collecting e-gadgets the way Steven apparently collected phones. But maybe there was more to it. Maybe the phones were precision tools of Steven's vile trade.

And what about the movie? What kind of movie? It was Luis who first asked about it that rainy day in Jamaica Plain. Luis was disappointed to be offered the gift of a Lava lamp instead of a movie or video. Did he, too, play a part for a camera—perhaps tossing a pass or throwing a baseball? Would a Latino boy be useful for Helping Hand, perhaps for a link to tutoring or ESL? Or was he to be the image of a yard worker who'd also provide a helping hand in winter by shoveling your walk and driveway? Was Steven producing a cassette or DVD for potential Helping Hand victims? Shots of Alice at her table befuddled by a sea of bills would surely inspire investors readily identified with her plight.

But who killed him?

I stand and toss out my coffee cup and head for the Beetle. Outside, it's gray and cold. I ought to go home, exercise Biscuit, and work on Locked Off. Instead I head for the Charles.

* * *

The Renfrew Rowing Club is a two-story clapboard barn affair with double doors facing the Storrow side, sliding doors and ramps on the Charles River. Under a rooftop gable, an insignia of crossed oars flashes orange and green. The inside smells of wood, oil, sweat, and river. A Nordic blond guy lifts a pair of oars.

"I'm looking for Dani Vogler."

Dani's sculling. Out there. He points midriver to a single woman rowing a boat as narrow as a knitting needle. A crew of eight lines up to lift a long boat—is it a shell?—being lowered on a crane. They're like a precision team, or pallbearers. Starboard, one foot in and down. . . ports. . . hold for cox—"

Coxswain, that's the one who sits in back and shouts. I step aside and see boats stored on high racks, most of fiberglass, though two wood ones way up high blend into the rafters and look as nostalgic as a Victorian attic when shafts of light wash bright gold through sooty panes in its high gables. This must be almost the end of the season.

A light bump at the dock signals Dani Vogler coming ashore. She stows her oars. She's tiny yet chiseled, with wind whipped streaked hair and a high forehead and a doll's complexion. The sun has come out, and in the light her upper body is a picture of health: arms and shoulders toned and strong. Waist down, however, Dani Vogler is a wraith, a skeleton in spandex.

May I speak to you for a moment? My name is Reggie Cutter."

Oh, you're the woman. . . about Steve. The service. . .

"Could we talk for a moment?"

Guess I have to. From a dusky corner, she retrieves a battered bench, swings it in in an arc, and sets it against the wall, then pulls on a Renfrew Rowing Club sweat suit, sits beside me, and rubs her palms on her thighs. Her hands are sinewy. She has her

mother's jaw. "I talked to both my dad and mother. They say I have to sing." Resignation dampens every syllable.

"Your family volunteered your talent. I understand that 'I Will Always Love You' was Steven's favorite."

"I sang it on Margaret's birthday. They got the piano tuned, so I couldn't say no."

"Your brother says you spend a lot of time here."

She twists her hair. "I do. And why do you suppose that is? You met my mother? And Margaret too? Wouldn't you hang out here if you were me?"

Avoid this one, Reggie. "Do you race?"

"Not single shell. For crews, yes. I'm coxswain. It's the one and only advantage of being small."

"So you yell through a megaphone?"

She laughs. "There's a couple old megaphones still around here in the boathouse somewhere. Today we use a battery-powered cox box, and I wear a headset. Speakers are spaced every other seat. Everybody can hear me."

She reties a sneaker and looks mournful. "So what else do you want me to sing?"

"What's easiest?"

"Not to choke me up, you mean." Her eyes tear. "It's horrible. I can't sleep. Maybe I've led a sheltered life, but nobody you actually know is supposed to get murdered. It's like there's a rule. Nobody you grew up with—that stuff's on TV, not your real life."

I hand her a Kleenex and remind myself that for Dan, Steven's death is a tragic loss, not the cessation of larceny. "Did you ever visit Steven at Barlow Square?"

"His temporary place?" She nods, blows her nose. "Nice apartment. It's yours, right? And the lady that owns it died?"

"Yes, that was my aunt. Steven knew her."

"She was the psychic one?" I nod. "Steve said she worked for the police. How cool is that?" She squints against the sun. "So you're psychic too? Steve said it runs in families."

"Sometimes."

"Is it like dreams in the daytime?"

"In a way. It's like intense symbols. They're almost physical."

"Cool-o." She squints at my face, as if to get a good look at something exotic. "Anyway, your aunt's apartment is lots better than that old woman's house out in the boonies."

"Hyde Park?"

"That place was depressing. It smelled like fungus. Steve said he needed a cheap place for a while."

"Did he say why?"

She gives me a sharp glance. "That's his business. I mean, it was." Her lip trembles. "The good part of it is, he was excited about getting a condo of his own."

I work to keep my voice conversational. "Do you know a close friend of Steven's named Alex Ribideau?"

"Close friend? That's so quaint, friend. You mean Steve's ex the dancer. For a couple years straight, you never saw Steve without him. They were like, joined at the—well, not the hip. I saw him dance last year. Steve got tickets. Margaret was supposed to go. She's got a thing for Alex. But she had a flare-up, so I'm the only family member who went. Steve brought this high school kid."

"Luis Diaz?"

"You know him?"

Steven said he was mentoring Luis. He seemed very proud.

"Yeah, he wanted me to teach him to row, but we don't have a junior program. Frankly, I was glad." She cracks her knuckles. "The usual body type for a rower is tall and lean. That's the me-

chances of it. This kid's built like"— She opens her arms wide — "thick, like a block. Like a wrestler. He was Steve's charity case. I guess he's big enough to overpower Steve."

"You mean murder him?"

"That's what the police asked me, two detectives. And a lot of questions about Alex too. I don't know where he is. I said I didn't know. That's a lot, accusing somebody of a murder."

"Do you have any idea?"

"They asked, I couldn't help. They grilled my brother. The last time I saw Steve was early October. I told the detectives it was a visit, which it was. He made Manhattans. Actually I stopped by his place to pick up some goggles."

"For skiing this winter?"

"Swimming. He had these special goggles from this guy's boat."

"What guy? I'm responsible for the memorial service invitations. If there's somebody I ought to include—"

"I don't know his name. The boat is called — something Oriental."

"Oriental?"

"A place, *Shangri-La*— no, *Shanghai*, that's it, *Shanghai*."

"The city in China? Is the man Chinese?"

"I don't know. Steve went with him on cruises. Sometimes he flew places, met the boat. Sometimes the boat was here in the harbor."

"A yacht?"

"It's a tugboat. A tugboat with a hot tub."

"Who owns *Shanghai*? Whose boat is it?"

She rubs her hands. "When you start to row, your hands blister and peel. Then they get calloused. That's what you want. That's what I want for my feelings. I don't know who Steve hung out with. My brother might know. Or Alex, if you can find him.

Steve and I went to formals, you know? I was his date. How about this—I'll sing Schubert. I'll work it up, and it won't affect me one way or the other. You could try rowing. I recommend it. It tires you out, and you beat guys arm wrestling. Helps you sleep too—as long as nobody you danced with gets murdered in cold blood."

Chapter Thirty-one

Howie, this is Reggie from Cutter Provision." I'm in the kitchen with the yellow pages opened to Marine, Docks Massachusetts Port Authority. I've dialed the Boston Towing & Transportation Company and got Howie on the two. "We've got an order for a tugboat named *Shanghai* and our computer's down. Is she your boat?"

Nope, she's not ours. Try Water Boat Marina on Long Wharf.

So I do. CeeZee answers. She asks, "Truck or tender?"

Tender? It's lingo I don't know. "Truck."

"She's here. We're right by the Marriott. Ask for Rory. He's dockmaster."

The Marriott looks like a big brick cruise ship beside the docks of Long Wharf. The wind is up, and the autumn tourists look like chilled birds. I could use a hat.

"Are you Rory?"

"I'm Sam."

He taps the "Sam" patch on his jacket and brushes past. I stare

at a half dozen gleaming white gin palaces moored dockside here in the harbor in the off-season. They're bobbing in choppy water, straining at the lines. I'm stopped at a locked gate with a sign: 'No Unauthorized Visitors or Personnel Beyond This Point.' Here comes a man in heavy denim who nods when I ask, 'Rory?' I'm looking for a tugboat named *Shanghai*.

He's about forty, ruddy-cheeked and bushy-browed. "Right out there. The furthest out."

A huge dull gray-brown vessel bristles with antennas and radar at the very end of the main dock. "No, I don't mean a ship," I say, "but a tugboat."

"That's it. It's an ocean salvage tug—or was. It's a yacht now. A shipyard in Louisiana did the conversion. It'll go anywhere in the world. You're looking at the newest thing in luxury yachts."

"A former tugboat . . . does it have a hot tub?"

"And a grand piano, so they say. Can't swear to it. I haven't been belowdecks."

"Do you know the owner's name?"

"It's Wing."

"Is he Chinese?" He's eyeing me now. "The reason I ask, a friend of the owner died recently, and I've brought an invitation to his memorial service." Reaching into my purse, I wave the paper proof. "I brought this invitation personally. I wasn't sure the *Shanghai* would be here."

"She heads for Nova Scotia tonight. She'll try to beat the front coming in." He sees my puzzlement. "The marine forecast calls for gale-force winds after midnight. You'll want to stay ashore, inside."

"Will do. Can you help me? I want to deliver this invitation. The owner of the *Shanghai* was a good friend of the young man who's deceased. Did you perhaps know him?" I step close as wind

cuts through my jacket. "Steven Damelin. I understand he was a frequent guest on the *Shanghai*."

"Him and every Tom, Dick, and Nevermind. It's a big party boat."

"If I could just deliver this in person."

"Sorry, strict rules. I can't let you . . ." But he eyes a shivering woman on a sad mission in the autumn wind. "Ah, what the heck, we'll give it a try. C'mon." He unlocks the gate, leads me to the massive tugboat, steps aboard, and reappears with a pony-tailed woman in a turtleneck and Levi's. "This is Hailey. She'll take your message. Shut the gate behind you, okay? The lock's automatic." Rory pivots. He's out of here.

"Hailey, are you the steward?"

"Crew."

"I'm Regina Cutter. You can take a message to—is it Mr. Wing?"

"I'll take it." She has narrow shoulders, no hips, hair that's nearly white. The radar thing on a mast revolves. Nothing about this vessel says yacht.

I take out the invitation and envelope. "To put Mr. Wing's name on the outside . . . is there a flat surface I can write on?"

Hailey signals me across the gangplank onto the deck and through a door—a hatch?—and we enter a compartment paneled in rosewood and lined with charcoal leather banquettes. The lamps are soft-etched glass. From hidden speakers come baroque violins. It's Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. There's a small desk, also rosewood. "You can't get this anymore," I say. "It's an endangered wood."

It dawns on me. As Rory said, it's a yacht, an inside-out yacht in disguise. "How long is the *Shanghai*?"

"Two hundred twenty-six feet." Does my expression amuse her? "Seventy-two hundred horsepower. Twin screws."

'Amazing. I hear there's a hot tub. And a grand piano too.

'And a Global Positioning System and full ocean electronics. And a reinforced steel hull."

I want to know: does anything here resemble a wooden log? If Steven partied on this vessel, the fact that he might have drowned is suddenly crucial. I can see it now: the hot tub could be a drowning place, or the sea itself in the autumn when the water's getting colder. Suppose Steven was pushed overboard. His body could have been recovered and moved. I've got to contact Devaney. And this wonderful leather— I stroke it. 'Is it kid?'

Hadley smirks. 'It's the sheathing of marine mammal organs. You can guess which ones.' The smirk widens.

My pen is out. 'Hadley, if you wouldn't mind, could you give me Mr. Wing's first name?"

"Sinclair."

It's an Anglo name. No Cathay. No Ming dynasty. Did you know Steven Dameron? I understand he was a frequent guest.

"We don't disclose the names of guests."

"But he's dead."

"Even so."

'I believe he cruised on the *Shanghai* out of— perhaps different ports."

"Maybe so."

I could leave extra invitations in case other friends of Steven's are on board. 'Such as Alex Ribideau. Suppose he's hiding below, ready to escape into Canada. Homicide has got to search this vessel immediately. Steven had numerous friends, I say. 'Others might like to attend the service."

'We leave port in just a few hours. The *Shanghai* won't be back for months."

"May I give this invitation to Mr. Wing?"

"He's not aboard."

I'm out of gambits. I cap the pen, hand her the envelope—and notice a mounted wood sculpture at the far end of this space. It freezes my blood. It's an abstract carving, but cylindrical. It's like a log. Yes, a log. Can I get close enough to touch it? I step that way, but get no psychic message. It's ten feet away. Am I blocking my own sixth sense?

"May I help you ashore?"

"That wood sculpture . . . is it Brancusi?"

"It's African."

"I'd love to see it up close."

"I'm sorry, we don't give tours." I'm desperate to make contact with the sculpture. No way. Hailey is at my elbow, ushering me out. I'm on the deck in the sharp wind when a second crewman appears, also in Levi's and turtleneck, a broad-shouldered man. "Shawn, please escort Ms. Cutter ashore."

Down the gangplank, he says, "Watch your step, please, lady."

His *l*'s aren't clearly spoken. "Please" comes out *preeze*. I turn to say thank you—and see his face. It could be Japanese, maybe Korean or Thai. But if I'm right, Shawn's is a face of China.

Shawn? No, Xian. I'm sure of it. From my car, hands shaking, I call Devaney. Damn voice mail. Where is he? I leave a message saying that it's urgent. I'm just back when Maglia shows up at my house. "Frank's tied up. What can we do for you?"

"Come in, Mr. Maglia. I'm so glad you've come." We stand in my foyer. "A yacht—the *Shanghai*—leaves Long Wharf tonight. I've just learned Steven Damelin was a regular guest on it. It's a tugboat."

"To clarity, Ms. Cutter: is it a tug or a yacht?"

"Slow it down, Reggie. It's an ocean salvage tugboat converted to a luxury vessel of over two hundred feet. I went aboard to de-

liver a memorial service invitation to the owner, Sinclair Wing. One of the crewmen is Chinese."

"And?"

And it could be a big break in the case. It links the murder with the blood marks on my door."

"Our forensic linguist—"

"I remember Hugh Lee very well, but a contact of mine knows Chinese and says the marks on my door mean corpse or death trap. Should I add pineapple? No, skip it. And slow it down, Reggie. All that must be investigated, don't you see?"

"Not quite. Suppose you explain it to me."

"I believe Steven traveled on the *Shanghai*. My next door neighbor verifies his departures. She saw him leave in taxicabs with luggage. So did his former landlady."

And so . . . you want us to investigate this tugboat which is a yacht because Damelin was a guest and because he traveled? And because one crewman seems to be of Chinese extraction? I see "crazy lady" in his eyes.

"Suppose Alex Ribideau is aboard."

This gets his attention. "Do you have reason to think so?"

It just makes sense. He and Steven were longtime partners. If Steven was a frequent guest on the *Shanghai*, so was Alex. He had to be. Detective Devaney told me about the autopsy report—about the cause of death, the water in Steven's lungs. The *Shanghai* has a hot tub."

"You imagine Damelin drowned in the tub?"

Or was pushed overboard. The boat sails for Nova Scotia tonight. There's no time to lose. And there's something else, a wood sculpture. It's cylindrical. It might be a weapon used in Steven Damelin's death."

He runs a thumb along his lacquered nails. "Ms. Cutter, when Damelin was killed, you agreed to help us out."

"Of course. That's why I—"

"But in the background. Behind the scenes. Isn't that right?"

"Of course. But—"

"No buts. You're working overtime on conjecture, Ms. Cutter. It gets the juices going. But the thing is, you can't arrest anybody on it. You can't arraign, try, convict, or sentence anybody to prison on it. And as for the *Shanghai*, you can't—absolutely cannot—get a search warrant on conjecture."

"I'm only trying to help."

"Put 'trying' to good use, Ms. Cutter. Mind your business, maybe stay inside. A storm's coming through tonight." He points to the small yellow book on a far table. "*Survival Handbook*, right? How to escape from alligators? My wife bought me one of those books. It gave me a big laugh."

Chapter Thirty-two

With Jos old Rand M Nally open on the kit hen table fingers trembling, I trace the North American coast to Halifax where the *Seaborn* is likely bound. It's after 4:00 p.m., and the wind is whipping Barlow Square, nature's own leaf blower. Maybe Sinclair Wing and guests are en route to the St Lawrence Seaway. Foul weather is typical in the Canadian Maritimes this time of year but maybe that doesn't matter because it's the very weather for which *Shanghai* was built.

Where's Devaney? I've put in two more calls. Has Magda warned him off. Told him I'm meddling and delusional?

I've googled Wing. He's an entrepreneur and founder of White Way Parking Systems. I recognize the logo. Mr Wing having pocketed plenty of my cash in garages over the years. The link to a *Forbes* article tells me he was twice married, long divorced, has grown children, is a skier and adventurer with wide-ranging investments. It's the life my own ex idolized.

Biscuit whimpers, dog-stress reacting to the weather. The

wind has intensified over the past hour. It whistles and whines from the southeast, and the rain has begun. And it's cold, barely forty degrees with a windchill factor. With daylight savings time gone, it's dark before 6:00 p.m. except for the gaslights on the square, where wet tree branches sway in the wind. I heat a veggie stew and feed Biscuit a couple potato chunks, which she adores. The rain now beats in sheets against the windows, yet the dog goes to the door and whines. "Okay, Biscuit, I hear you." Nature calls, out we go.

My raincoat is no match for the cold or this deluge, and the umbrella nearly blows inside out. We go to the corner and back in five minutes. Nobody's outside. Devaney still hasn't called. I towel the dog and hang my raincoat on the shower rod.

What to do? Notch up the thermostat and pay a few bills? Phone Devaney yet again? No, he'll surely think me overwrought. Restraint is the watchword, though my stomach grinds. I straighten the kitchen, toss out a few old magazines, water the plants, turn on another lamp. On its top shelf, QUART gleams as it beckoning me to the kitchen bar where the mill workers' hopes and fears mix in language lost to Steven Damelin in another century.

What if those workers could see the future? Suppose the Dameliuskis could foresee that their quest for decent wages and respect—for bread and roses—would decay into cravings for mere money and status. What would they think? I turn away. The *Shangrai* is probably north of Cape Ann by now, whoever's aboard having drinks and dinner. Did Steven lounge on those soft banquettes? Did he phone his Helping Hand victims from shipboard? Wasn't Alice Cotter one of them? And Jo?

It's still evening, but I give Biscuit a new chew toy and decide to turn in and read. I lock up, wash, undress, put on night clothes and a robe, arrange a bank of pillows against the

headboard, and pick up a new novel But there's a certain scratching noise. It s off and on, scratch scratch I start reading my book. Scratch.

What is it?

With my book set aside, I peer through the slats of the blinds of every window, but see no branches touching the house There's nothing but thick rain Back onto the bed, I turn up the lamp—

And just then the power fails. It's that sickening shutdown of lights, fridge, every appliance dying. You flip the switches both in futility and hope Where's a flashlight? I look outdoors Except for the gaslights, the whole square is dark I feel my way to the kitchen, strike a match, fumble for a candle

What is that scratching noise? Yes, Biscuit is crunching her toy, but behind the canine teeth, the sound of clawing It's like raking.

What *is* it?

Biscuit whines in a tone I have not heard It s as though she feels gagged. "What is it, girl?"

I go room to room, patrolling in pitch-darkness Biscuit stays at my ankles Back in the bedroom, I start for the bed but go to the window

I'm stopped dead. Before me just outside the windowpane, there's a wire—no, a rope A pale rope is dangling in front of my bedroom window.

It snakes left, snakes right I'm frozen, watching Side to side it snakes.

Biscuit s fur is rising She growls low, then whines like a banshee Someone someone is climbing down that rope Climbing down from Steven's apartment above

The cell phone is in my purse on the kitchen counter Biscuit is rooted, trembling from head to haunches She howls like a

maniac 'Biscuit,' I say softly, but she's beyond timid plaints What to do? By feeling my way along the wall in the darkness, I could go to the kitchen for the phone or else go to my closet, the closet here in the bedroom where I stashed the handguns It's a split second decision I step sideways, feel the clothes hangers, and reach high onto the closet shelf Shoe boxes tumble at my touch, a cascade of shoes The rope snakes as I paw at toes, heels Here it is—

The gun. The Taurus .38.

"Biscuit, shhh."

The rope through the slats of the blinds, I now see a pair of shoes on the rope. They're like water shoes, rubber shoes, at the top of my window and descending Crossed at the ankle, they're coming down the rope -they're dance shoes

I feel the barrel and the handle of the gun My fingers wrap around the grips.

Now the dance shoes settle on my window ledge And there's a club, or a bar It swings hard -bam against my window Bam, smash The pane shatters Blades of glass cascade inside with the wind and rain Biscuit yowls She's showered in glass, and my feet are bare One step, I'll be lacerated The shoes are planted on my window ledge and the club is a crowbar A crowbar broke the glass Now it's poking inside the window A black gloved hand with a crowbar starts to reach inside

"Stop—"

Inside my room.

"Biscuit—"

The dog is braced to spring The crowbar is raised to strike my dog.

Arm straight out, gun hammer cocked, I shout, "Stop or I'll—" The crowbar is raised.

"Stop—"

Brace your right arm, Reggie. Lock your right thumb free of the hammer, aim, squeeze the trigger at the shoes and the storm and the rope. Steady squeeze . . .

Until the room explodes.

Chapter Thirty-three

Did you catch him? Did you?" It's my voice shouting from the banker of my own head. I hear a terrible ringing in both ears. The cops seem to keep saying Gravel and hook. Biscuit shakes like a leaf in a gale. This is a gale. I hug her closer. Through the broken window, I see two more patrol cars enter the alley below. The power came back on a few minutes ago, so the water and glass glint and shine in the household light.

The uniformed police officers do not know that I fired a gun. The Taurus is back on the closet shelf in a shoe box. The barrel was not to the touch, but I boxed the .38 before the cops got here. I pick another glass shard from Biscuit's fur. Will a twenty-four hour glass repair service fix my window in the middle of the night? What about a vet?

"Reggie," says a familiar voice.

Frank, I say. At last. It's Devaney, who arrives rumpled in a bulky coat with soaked trouser cuffs. I want to hug him. I mean

loafers and my ankle-length fur for warmth. I've spread towels over the floor, but it's a mess.

"You okay? Dog too?"

"I think so."

He sniffs. "An officer discharged a weapon in here?"

"No, sir."

"No, sir."

He looks from one officer to the other. "Okay, what have you got?"

The first patrol cop says rope and descend, then the mantra, gravel and hook.

"Let's check it out."

The three troop out, and I try, without success, to tape a plastic sheet over the broken window. In moments Devaney and the blues come back with the dripping rope, like a lasso. At one end is an octopus of steel hooks.

He says to me, "A grappling hook."

Grappling. Not gravel, but a grappling hook. "Officers," he asks the cops, "can you find a piece of board for that window?" They stiffen. It's not in their job description. "In the interest of the crime scene, if you will."

They will.

"Upstairs too."

Upstairs? Frank, my God, did he break into Steven's too? It's empty. There's only a sofa. Why me? I fight hot tears.

Sit down, Reggie. Let's sit down and debrief.

"Why upstairs? Why me?"

He guides me to a kitchen chair and sits opposite. Biscuits in my lap, and I describe her banshee whine. They were lightweight shoes, Frank. I could see the toes and arches flex, like dance shoes. His eyes narrow. I know who you're thinking of. Neither of us needs to say Alex. So he wasn't on the *Svaneha*

"But how did he get to an upper floor? The whole house was locked."

The assailant used a grappling hook. From the back alley, it was pitched up over the fire escape rail. The assailant climbed the rope."

But I saw him climb down. Feet first, the shoes—"

"Sure, he climbed up the back wall of the house, then got onto the fire escape and broke the upstairs apartment window.

"Steven's window."

"And went inside. The floor is tracked up, and we traced the wet footsteps in every room. Then he climbed back out, moved the hook over, then lowered himself down to your window. It's easier to wield the crowbar with feet braced on the window ledge. You're pretty sure it was a crowbar?"

"Definitely. He smashed out the window and was about to hit Biscuit with it. It was dark, but I could see the shoes, the crowbar, and a dark-gloved hand."

Then what happened? He lost his grip, is that it? Lost his grip and fell down to the alley?" That hawk glint in Devaney's eye says he knows there's more to it. His coat has a bulky zip-in lining. And me across from him in the heavy fur. We're two fat suits. Devaney prompts me. "You think he fell?"

Frank. I may have shot him. Jo had. I found two handguns in a box in the kitchen when I moved in."

"Guns in Jo's kitchen? Here, in Jo's?" He tries to conceal his surprise. "Were they loaded?"

I avoid the question. "There's a Colt .44, like an Old West gun, and a Taurus .38. Jo never told me about them. I don't even know whether they were hers."

You used the .38?" I nod. "You loaded and fired it tonight?"

It was already loaded. I braced my arm like on television. Like this." Furry arms out, I pull my trigger finger.

"Did you hear a cry? Any sounds?"

"The whole room exploded. My ears are still ringing. I'm worried about Biscuit. Her coat was full of glass."

He pats the dog, who licks his fingers. "She looks okay. Let's see the gun." Holding Biscuit, I get the shoe box. Devaney lifts the lid, leans close, and sniffs. Then he gives me a reproachful, lingering look, which lets him control the situation.

"I suppose you're going to confiscate it," I say.

"We'll need to check it out. For ballistics."

"Frank, without that gun, I could be dead."

"Reggie, did it occur to you that this gun could be the reason for the break-in? Suppose somebody used it in a crime and wants it back? When you found guns in Jo's apartment after she died, didn't that set off alarm bells? Didn't it?"

"Frank, my life is nothing but alarms—starting when a blue car tried to run me down the day before Steven was murdered. It felt deliberate." I tell him about the *Survival Handbook* and show him the torn-off paper with "You're going to need this." I set the book and note on the table in front of him. Biscuit wriggles in my arms.

"You have no idea who sent this? No guesses?"

"No."

But he takes this seriously because his eyes get that faraway filmy look, like fish on ice.

"Remind me about your home security situation."

"I have new locks. I have dead bolts."

"This handbook is classifiable as assault. Do you know that?"

"I wasn't attacked."

"You don't have to be. The threat constitutes assault. Our lab needs to go over these documents. You'll surrender them?"

"Along with the .38?"

He massages his neck. "In my line of work, Reggie, you per-

ter try not to second-guess yourself. Tests are important. The law is important." His eyes lock on mine. "To verify you were not aware until very recently that your late aunt's household contained firearms, isn't that correct?"

"I—"

"Yes, it's correct. And you resorted to a firearm in self-defense, isn't that right?" I pause. "Not to injure or to kill, but to neutralize a threat to your life. Isn't that right?" I blink, trying to follow. "Because, Reggie, it is unlawful to discharge a firearm with the intent to kill. That would constitute an intent to commit homicide. Self-defense means that you perceived a threat to your life and discharged a firearm in order to neutralize the threat. Do you understand me?"

"I get it. I didn't shoot to kill. I fired the gun to neutralize the threat to my life."

"Good. Good that you understand that. Because we'll have to submit a report." He tucks the shoe box under his arm.

"Frank, there's more. I believe that Steven Damerin ran a racket called Helping Hand. It was a phony personal services business. Elderly people invested and were robbed."

"Elderly people . . . not Jo?"

"Yes, Jo. The deal Steven talked about the day before he died—it was the Helping Hand scheme. Jo got sick before he could fleece her. I don't know the specifics, but he goaded his victims by phone. And he made a promotional film or video. His former landlady's in it. So is Luis Diaz."

"The Dominican kid?" I nod. "You've seen this film?"

"No. Luis asked about it, and the landlady played the part of a financially overwhelmed retiree. Her name's Alice Collier. She's in assisted living at Silver Ridge Village in Brockton." He makes a note and begins to stand. "Frank, what about the tugboat yacht, the *Shanghai*?"

"What about it?"

"It could be a big break in the case. I told Magda maybe Steven drowned in the hot tub. That log I see in my vision—it could be a wood sculpture I saw on the yacht."

"You got a psychic vibe?"

"No." He frowns and shakes his head. "My sixth sense doesn't turn on like the radio, Frank. You know that."

"But you were up close, right? Close enough to feel something."

"I didn't get to touch it. You know I work best from physical contact."

He sighs. "Reggie, I'll say this much. Grappling hooks are found on boats and ships. A grapnel is a small anchor. A lifeboat on an ocean tug has an anchor just the size of the hook your assailant used. The Coast Guard works with the police."

"So you'll investigate?"

"Absolutely. That's my point. *We'll* investigate. Law enforcement will do the job. You, Reggie, you need to take it easy. Clean up your place, take care of your dog, go about your business. You're planning the memorial service, right?"

"It's next Wednesday."

"I want to be informed about it. We'll have a detail there. But you take it easy. We're stepping up security on Barlow Square."

"Patrols?"

"And surveillance. Because you're targeted. Or maybe there's something inside the house. Maybe it's you. Maybe it's both. Somebody's after something, and the stakes are high. You take care of yourself. You play it safe."

Chapter Thirty-four

Safe? To close my eyes for a split second is to see the crowbar and gloved hand thrust from the depths of perpetual night. Yes, you can get window glass service in the wee hours in the cold rain and howling wind. And yes, the ER vet at Angel Memorial Hospital will examine your trembling beagle. She'll test her hearing and eyes and inspect the coat and tween toes to pronounce her unharmed—this after you wait your turn beside a nun with her ailing pet iguana.

Then you can return to the crime scene, aka your home, take notice of the police cruiser that's parked on your block, fasten each and every chain and bolt, and bundle yourself in blankets on the front room sofa and face the mind's crowbar while you wait for the dawn that never comes.

Until, at last, it does come: the pale gray first light that yields itself to a morning so clear, bright, and blue that it's surreal. In jeans and a sweater, I sweep up tracked-in dirt and glass that's

scattered like shrapnel both upstairs and down. As if to banish the night, I throw the sopping floor towels into the trash.

From the front window, I glimpse Trudy Praeltz loading her van. I grab a jacket and dash outside. "Trudy, were you home last night?"

"Night shift, remember?"

"Somebody tried to break into my house."

"You probably heard storm noises, Reggie. One of the doctors swore the wind reached hurricane force."

"No, you don't understand, my house—"

"Just look at that poor tree over there, those downed limbs."

"Trudy, listen to me. Somebody climbed down a rope from Steven Damelin's fire escape and knocked out my bedroom window."

While you were inside? Holy shit. She pauses. "It's because the apartment's empty. Crooks have that radar. We'll all feel safer when your new tenant moves in." Trudy thrusts a handful of Almond Joys into my jacket pocket. "Help yourself. Coconuts not selling."

"Have you noticed anybody around the square? Anybody hanging around?"

Funny, I thought about calling a cop over here yesterday afternoon at about two. I had my eye on somebody in a baseball cap in the alley."

"Male?"

"I thought so. He walked back and forth. That's why I noticed, back and forth for nearly an hour. I couldn't see the face."

Did he look like a dancer, muscular erect posture?"

"I couldn't really tell."

Or maybe a kid, a big lumbering teen? She shrugs. "How about tall with blond hair? Did you see the hands? You're a

nurse, did you see red marks on his hands, like cuts that are just healing?"

Reggie, a person can't see much looking straight down. I think the cap was brown. You can't report everybody. You'd get sued."

"So the cap is all that you saw? That's it?"

"Yep, that's it. How about a Xanax, hon? I have samples. It'll calm you down, get you through the day."

"No thanks. I'm on high alert."

"We call it acute stress disorder."

I ignore this, reminding Trudy of the memorial service.

"I'll be there. If you want candy bars at the reception, give me a buzz. Is your pup okay?"

She's fine. It's a miracle she wasn't cut. Glass flew everywhere. She's a great watchdog."

Studies show that dogs help keep their owners' blood pressure down. They have fewer heart attacks.

How about fewer bludgeonings by crowbar? Back inside, I put out clean towels and try to work on "Ticked Off." Impossible. My concentration is wrecked.

Suppose there is something targeted in the house—though Jo had no good jewelry and no family silver, and my own pieces aren't worth an aerial trapeze burglary. The handguns, of course, are a good bet. I can't think of anything else.

Except—there's the Corsair Financial sheet that the cleaning guys found in Steven's apartment behind the mantel. I couldn't make sense of it days ago, but maybe I read it wrong. Maybe it wasn't about microcap stocks or the SEC fine.

Back to my lingerie drawer, I grab the xeroxed Corsair sheet and stare at the column of abbreviations and numbers. Are they account numbers? They're not Social Security because each has ten digits—like an area code plus the local number.

Yes, that's it. Suddenly the column makes sense. It's so obvious: they're phone numbers run together. And the letters? They're not alphabetized, but midway down the list I see "CDA."

Is this Alice Collier, surname first, with middle initial D? Grabbing the city directory, I once again look up H. Collier on Deary Street and match it to the numbers by the abbreviation for Alice D. Collier.

Ta-dah! I'm looking at a list of Helping Hand victims.

Do I call Devaney? Or Maglia? First, Reggie, make certain, or the detectives will go ballistic. Devaney's test question always lurks: do you feel psychic vibes?

I hold the paper, close my eyes, and try to concentrate. Alice Collier's face comes to mind, but memory isn't the same as a psychic vision. As hard as I wish for it, this is simply a piece of paper with a column of handwritten numbers and initials. No, it's not psychic.

But it's dynamite.

Who'd know the mechanics of the Helping Hand scheme—my ex, Marty? When hell freezes over.

Who else? My Silicon Valley son, Jack, an e-generation wizard. I wake him up. "Jeez, Mom, I just got to sleep."

"Sorry, Jack. I forgot you're a West Coast ow. There's a money puzzle I need help with right now. It's part of a scam called Helping Hand. It victimizes older people."

"Mom, is some scumbag cheating you?"

"Older than your mother, Jack. I mean, the trifocal and hearing-aid and dentures generation. Not me. Not nearly. Are you awake? Are you listening?"

"Totally." He goes un-huh while I tell what I know about Helping Hand. "Mom, you're describing a Ponzi scheme. You've heard of them."

"Robbing Peter to pay Paul?"

"Sure. It's named for an Italian guy, Ponzi, back in some other century. The victim believes it's a great investment, but it's actually money from some other fool suckered into the scheme."

"Peter's money paid out to Paul, and vice versa."

"Yeah, until the Ponzi character cashes in. He waits till the victim gets greedy after a few rounds of big returns. Then, wham, he shuts it down, then starts all over again with another mooch list."

"Mooch? The list of victims?"

"You got it."

"I've literally got it, Jack. I'm looking at a mooch list right now. Here's my question: could a Ponzi scheme be conducted mostly by phone?"

"Sure."

"How? Can't numbers be traced?"

"Think phone cards, Mom. Or stolen phones. Best of all, you'd phone your victims from outside the country."

"From Mexico? Or Canada?"

Jack chuckles. "All of the above. Get a special-offer phone deal, call the mooch, and tell that person they've been selected for something special, like their name came up for a rare opportunity and it's a once-in-a-lifetime. Canada's really good. Say Canada, and people think it's rock solid. Nobody'd cheat you in Canada. Tell them to send a cashier's check. Make your calls and ditch the phone for new ones."

"Or keep the old phones as souvenirs? Or trophies?"

"Whatever." In Jack's pause, I hear keyboard clicks, my son's pulse of life. "Mom, you're not... I mean, nobody's hit you up, right?"

"Am I a mooch? No, dear, your mother is not a mooch."

"What about that murdered guy?"

"The police are working night and day, dear. And there's a cruiser outside round the clock."

So what are you doing with a mooch list, Mom?"

Decoding it for the police, dear. And getting ready to go buy some new towels. Someday I want to hear all about this data mining that you do. Go back to bed now. Sleep tight. Stay in touch."

An hour later, Biscuit goes into raptures. An engine outside has roared and ceased — loud enough for two engines. That means one thing. I go to open the front door and call, "Stark!"

He's not alone. The man beside him has muttonchop whiskers and thighs and shoulders out of an NFL beer ad. Two Harleys are backed against the curb behind them, the Fatso and a bike with skulls and flames. "This is Oliver. We're gonna move the sofa from upstairs."

The next half hour becomes a stairway wrestling match of muscle and bone vs. upholstery and the steel innards of a three-seat pullout. I myself tote the three down-filled pillowback cushions. By 10:15 a.m., Steven's sofa is settled in the basement beside the blue chest. "It'll go to his sister in Lawrence," I say.

Oliver, who has not broken a sweat, tugs his whiskers, says no thanks to beer or coffee, and won't accept a "teamster" tip. He takes off with a blast that'd rupture eardrums. Stark lingers, and frankly I am glad. He'll take Biscuit for a quick run until the coffee's ready.

Stay out of the alley, Stark. There's broken glass."

Twenty minutes later, I fill the Bruins mug and pass him the sugar crock. Stark spoons in his five and straddles the same kitchen chair that Devaney occupied hours ago.

So the storm busted your upstairs apartment window. Cutter. Is that the story?"

"How do you know?"

Because there's fresh putty around the window glass up there. It was a helluva wind last night, Cutter, but not enough to smash out a window. You got busted glass only under your place, no neighbors, and a cop car circled the square twice while I was out with the dog. Twice." His eyes lock on mine. "Is that a coincidence?" I shake my head. "What's up?"

So I tell him.

"Let's take a look at your bedroom window." We go in. He looks it over, grunts, raises the new window to look down into the alley and peer up at the fire escape. Window closed, we go back to our coffee. "So you shot and missed? Or maybe wounded the guy?"

"Either. The rain washed away any visible blood on the ground below my window, but the cops took some samples for the lab, so we'll see."

"You think the crowbar was the dancer?"

"The shoes were the giveaway. They looked soft and pliable, like dance slippers. Detective Devaney agreed. I mean, he didn't disagree."

Stark wraps his fingers around the mug and again fixes his Atlantic-gray eyes on mine. "Cutter, have you ever seen climbing shoes?"

"No. What are they?"

"These old town house bricks have deep grooves. For a climber, they're a piece of cake."

"So what are climbing shoes?"

"They got high arches and cupped heels for edging and bouldering. They look like slippers."

"Like slippers?"

"That's what I said." He studies my face. "You got a rock climber friend, Cutter?"

"You mean . the break-in wasn't the dancer? It was somebody else?"

"Figure the odds Hedge your bets I mean, it could be a dancer, but maybe not What about that crowbar?"

"I told you, it smashed the glass."

"A small mallet would do And be easier to handle A crowbar means business."

"Overkill?"

The word hangs between us "You mean the crowbar was meant for more than . . property damage "

"I'd think so."

"But why? Why would anyone come after me?"

"What about that car that knocked you down last month?"

"It could have been a joyrider."

"You didn't think so when you hit the asphalt "

"I was upset."

"Shit, Cutter, another minute, you ll say it s the man in the moon. Get real."

"I am real."

"Get out of your trance."

"Don't insult me."

Our voices rise, and Biscuit looks from one of us to the other and barks We watch, silent, as she jumps to the middle of the kitchen floor, stance wide, chest out facing the two of us, then barks, barks, barks

"She's pissed," says Stark.

"Upset," I say.

We both extend contrite hands to Biscuit, who turns, tail down, disgusted, and walks out on us both We lower our voices

For the life of me, Stark, I don't know why I'd be targeted

'For the life of you, Cutter, you better try to figure it out " He

drains the mug and stands. "I gotta go. Do me a favor. Pick up the glass in the alley. Do it today."

"Why?"

"So Fatso doesn't get a flat when I ride back there at night. Call it the Stark patrol. See ya later, Cutter. Take it easy. Dress warm."

Chapter Thirty-five

Stark goes, half rough rider, half my caffeinated guardian angel. My ears ring all over again. Climbing shoes, not dance slippers? Should I call Devaney to tell him that I don't know a dancer from a . . . a boulderer?

Suppose it wasn't Alex gripping that crowbar.

Suppose the crowbar was meant for my skull. Was it Xian? When the *Shanghai* left Long Wharf, did Xian stay ashore to finish the job he began with Steven's murder? The climber went first into Steven's empty apartment. Was he looking for the mooch list behind the mantel? When he found it was gone, did he guess that I'd got hold of it and climb down after me?

Suppose Sinclair Wing sent him. Suppose that Steven called his Helping Hand victims from the *Shanghai* and gave the yachtsman a cut of the money. Maybe something went wrong between them, murderously wrong for Steven. The superrich can be greedy, thrive on sleaze and crime, and respect murder as a regrettable necessity. Or a hobby.

Or am I clutching at straws? At chopsticks? The memorial service is looming, almost here, countdown to launch. Steady, Reggie, stay on course.

Laundry. Nothing grounds a woman like a mundane load of wash. With household help a mere memory, I gather an armful from the hamper and head to the basement and start the machine. The setting for a second rinse feels somehow virtuous. While down here, I'll throw a dustcover over Steven's sofa. I drape an old sheet carefully, avoiding the center seat cushion where I'd sat in the emptied upstairs flat just before Meg showed the apartment to Mackenzie Carruthers — and just before I got covered in chimney soot. In the center cushion, I'd felt the water of Steven's drowning, and the log — the log of his concussion? Was he knocked unconscious before he drowned?

Pity — it was pity and horror that engulfed me back then. Pity for the young man who was kind to me and died so horribly.

And now?

Disgust. It surges from head to toe. Such potential, so smart and charming, Steven became crime's own protégé. Schooled by the Voglers, a star pupil, he trumped Corsair crimes with Helping Hand. Self-employed? Yes, Steven became an entrepreneur and an assassin of sorts. He killed financial futures.

But Steven Dumelin did not deserve the death penalty.

Who is his executioner?

I tug the sheet as the washing machine starts to hum and slosh. Pulling one corner around a down-filled back cushion, I feel a crackling. It's probably a stiff tag, but nothing I'd noticed when Stark and Oliver moved the sofa. I pull the sheet and again feel the crackle, then knead the soft cushion because there's something inside.

A quick zip of the cushion cover, and I'm pulling an envelope

from the down fill inside. It's a big mailing envelope. I hold it under the dim basement bulb, then dash upstairs to the light of the front room.

Clasp open. I reach inside and pull out photographs. They're large black-and-white glossy photographs of Steven, who's posing — yes, he's modeling. These are modeling photos. A quick shuffle, and here's the face of the Steven I met, pleasant and quick.

But other Stevens too—sultry, pouting, scowling. He's in leather, in suits, in bikinis. He wears crosses and a spiked dog collar and nothing else. His chest looks oiled.

Here's the stunner: an eight by ten glossy shot in a restaurant kitchen. Six chefs in white jackets and toques with knives surround Steven, who is lying naked on his stomach on a stainless table, surrounded by five lobsters. I count twenty-three. He winks at the camera, arms and hands out as claws. The chefs' expressions are lascivious. The tableau is all camp comedy and sex.

A calendar shot? A gay men's magazine with New England themes? Maine lobsters? The claws are wedged shut. Nobody will really take a blade to the star crustacean.

My scalp beats with my heart. So this is Steven's modeling career. He wasn't in *Esquire* or *GQ*, but yet these are professional shots. I turn the prints over. There's no photographer or studio name. No ID at all.

It's another tantalizing dead end.

Shuffling the photos, I pause again at the lobster shot with the six chefs' knife blades and claws. On the steel surface, Steven in the buff, in prone position, head raised in a vampy wink.

It's the wink that stops me at this moment, the facial expression. Something about his cheekbones, or is it his hairline? I look

closer, get out the magnifier, look again. And again. Something about the eyes.

It takes minutes to sink in. I've sorted back through the other photos. Steven in dog collar, Steven in leopard bikini. Absolutely Steven. No question.

The lobster shot, however, is . . . is not. The nude man lying with the lobsters is Andrew Vogler.

Chapter Thirty-Six

It's Wednesday afternoon, two hours till the 5:00 p.m. memorial service, and I don my black St. John knit from the Regina Baynes days and fasten a silver onyx brooch to the shoulder. The mail flutters, and I pick it up. Here's a postcard. "The Beaches of Waikiki," it says, showing white sand, blue waters, and surfers. It's addressed to me. Pacific is all good. Let's sip Kona when I get back. Next stop, Beirut. It's signed Knox and postmarked Hong Kong.

I stick it on the fridge with a magnet. It's about a fantasy life on another planet. It might as well be from Mars.

Off to All Souls Church, I stop at a stationer's for a guest book. In Memory, stamped in fourteen-karat gold, billable to Corsair Financial.

Soft light filters through the stained glass of the vaulted sanctuary. It's 2:18 p.m., and Rev. Craig Wetzel meets me in a cream robe with a clown collar and heavy cord belt, which is surely monastic chic. "The flowers are beautiful," I say, gazing at vases

of gladiolus clustered around the pulpit—and wishing for metal detectors at the entrance. Devaney has reported no arrest of an assailant and no gunshot wound victim treated in area hospitals, at least none that can be connected to my case.

Glassware clinks. "Mimi's Kitchen?" I ask.

"Mimi's supply corps. Reggie, we didn't discuss this, but leftover food, All Souls has a program . . ."

"Glad to hear it. It's yours."

On the vestibule table, I arrange the boyhood photographs of Steven that Margaret Vogler sent me. What would she or Eleanor or Leonard think of Steven with mascara and eyeliner and a spiked dog collar? I open the guest book. Just days ago, of course, the book was one of my clever devices to gather names—possibly the killer's among the signatures.

This afternoon I will watch Drew Vogler like a hawk, but carefully so that his suspicion is not aroused, which is why no one has been informed about the lobster photo.

I set out pens, arrange two bud vases of single roses, the Gina Baynes touch. And here come Andrew Vogler, Dani, and a woman introduced as Fay, her accompanist. Brother and sister pause at the memorial photos. Dani turns away, blinks and rubs her eyes—carefully because of her makeup. She's in a mocha sheath and cream voile blouse.

"I'm going to sing Schubert's 'Heidenroslein,' which is a famous folk song from Goethe. And also one late song, which translates as 'None but an Aching Heart Knows My Suffering.'"

Gail takes her and Fay down front to the piano, and we hear warm-up exercises sung in a voice that I would call thin, though serviceable. I'm with Andrew at the table. He, too, rubs his eyes. The hands are healing, the skin a paler pink.

A close look at his facial features confirms it: he's the male in the photo with the chefs.

"We were twelve that summer," he says, pointing to a picture of Steven on horseback. See how Steve sits him, like a jockey. He pats his breast pocket. "I wrote out my eulogy, but I'm no writer."

"If it's from the heart—"

Oh, straight from the heart. I took a lot of time, a whole afternoon off. Sarita gave me a hand with edits."

Footsteps and a sharp *tap tap* mean Margaret and Leonard Vogler. And that leprechaun cane.

"Regina."

Margaret, Leonard, good to see you. She's in smoke-gray chiffon with jet jewelry. His tie is black on black. Drew kisses her on the cheek.

Trills ripple from the piano near the nave where Dan rehearses "... weiss was ich leide ..."

Ah, our Dan, says proud papa Vogler. Margaret asks me about the reception.

Everything's set. Aromas of herbs and butter are wafting. Tinkle of glassware.

"Corsair is glad to sponsor—er, to host," says Vogler. "My dear, let us take our seats. Drew, join us? Regina?"

"Thanks, I'll see you in a bit."

I'm the unofficial greeter by default and design. As people arrive I welcome and guide them to the guest book. Most are strangers. The Corsair young men—I recognize their names from Drew's list as they sign the book. Physically they're either bench pressers or couch potatoes, but all seem to use the same wet hair look product and greet each other awkwardly. Bucket shop buccaneers.

Neighborhood people are here too, from Hyde Park to Barlow Square. There's a tall, gaunt woman with tiny gourds on her hat, a young couple with their baby, and a pink-cheeked older man

who might have come from a tramp across the moors. Plus a number of leather-jacketed men apparently from the Apollo Club scene despite the sour Matt Kitchel.

Is there a Helping Hand victim here in the church—an older woman who kept faith in Steven? A true believer who couldn't imagine that he'd cheat her of every last cent? How about the frail silver-haired figure in tweeds whose spidery handwriting says "Charlotte S. Vickery"? Or the plump woman in navy who writes 'Rest in peace' under her name? By 3:52 p.m., there are about a hundred people here.

Here comes Matt Kitchel himself. Surprise. He nods curtly but refuses to sign the book. Trudy arrives with some Mounds bars, and I point her to the reception hall.

"Meez Reggie—"

"Ari Tsakis."

"I come for my brother George too. The store open—people needs babies' milk."

"Of course. Please put George's name on the guest book too, and stay for the reception if you can."

It's three minutes until three o'clock. Here are others I recognize. The receptionist Sarita with the espresso eyeliner. Then Eleanor Comber sweeps in in a long black skirt and boiled wool jacket. She's with the trainer, Vicky, who smiles as Eleanor gives me a stony hello, signs the book with a flourish, and proceeds to sit several pews behind Leonard and Margaret Vogler. Vicky takes a pew by herself on the other side, a lone figure in khakis.

Here comes a dark-haired woman in aqua blue with a big teenage boy in a Raiders jacket. "Buenos días, Carmine. Buenos días, Luis."

Carmine shakes my hand. Luis jams his fists into the jacket pockets and stares at the floor. The crowbar man? Steven's killer? I can't believe it.

The bell strikes three. Gail suggests I sit close to the pulpit. Down a side aisle, I walk slowly, scanning faces.

Here's Magha and Devaney in a back pew.

"I am the resurrection and the life." A hush falls. The distant tinkle of caterers' glassware suddenly sounds jarring. Gail's voice claims the space. "We gather . . . pay tribute in respect and in love . . ."

She reads prayers from Old and New Testaments, the Koran, and *Teachings of Buddha*. I step to the pulpit microphone and briefly play my part, describing Steven's friendship with Jo across generations, his kindness on the day we met.

Newcomers catch my eye in the back pews: two women. Crystal and Doris Damelin. They sit together yet apart, Crystal staring and her mother—Steven's mother, his *mother*—slumped.

"Today's timely tribute to Steven . . .

I also see—for godsake—Stark. What's he doing here, looking stuffed into a sport coat, glowering. He's no friend of Steven's, so what's the point? I swear the man is nearly stalking me.

"To this community . . .

There's another figure too, bearded with bleached-blond tipped short hair. Something about him, the carriage of his shoulders—something familiar about those shoulders.

"This gathering of so many here today . . . a tribute to the many lives touched by Steven Damelin."

I sit down, angled sideways because, you see, I recognize those shoulders. Alex Rabideau's. It's Alex in a disguise. Is he here for Margaret Vogler's sake?

Drew approaches the pulpit and delivers a eulogy as if he's a head of state. "To ride horseback in the dawn with my brother . . . in the equities marketplace . . . side by side in life's pathways, generous to those ill-clad and ill-nourished. Amen."

Something rings familiar in those words, but everyone is moved. Some wipe tears at the finish.

I turn quickly to see — yes definitely Alex in that pew.

Rev. Welch calls for anyone else who wishes to speak. Intense silence falls, then a stirring as someone comes down the aisle. Suppose it's Alex — , but no, it's Luis Diaz, eyes downcast, lumbering. He stands before the altar, faces front, mumbles, 'Why God? — Why take Steven, my best, the best in the world? My man.' Gail touches his shoulder, helps him back to his seat. His muffled sobs fill the church until she takes the pulpit. 'The Lord God is righteous — justice and mercy.' Then on cue the piano, the thin soprano, 'Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt, weiss was ich leide — .' Gail offers a blessing, invites us to the fellowship of the reception, and it's over.

I race down the side aisle to tell Devaney and Maglia about Alex but get stuck behind the woman in the gourd hat. Alex is still in sight. I can see him — then I can't. Some are leaving, most funneling into the reception area. I get to Maglia and Devaney and huddle to whisper about Alex's disguise and point to the spot where he stood moments ago. Maglia bolts. Devaney beelines to the reception room.

I go in too. No sign of Alex, though maybe he's banished with Matthew Kitchel and the inner circle of the Apollo Clan, that Praetorian Guard. Most likely he'd make eye contact with Margaret Vogler. Maybe hiding in plain sight is the thrill.

Mimi's servers pour and smile in tuxedo shirts and bow ties. Groups form, the Corsair fraternity, the men of Apollo. I grab a glass of Rhône red and pivot to look for Alex. The peroxide hair is nowhere to be seen.

"Well, Regina Cutter."

"Well, Matthew Kitchel."

'Looking for someone?" His tone combines malice and teasing.

I thought I saw someone—someone with a new beard and hairstyle. Short blond hair."

"It's possible."

"I don't see him now."

"People come and go, don't they? Hard to keep track. Meanwhile, you can talk to the gumshoes."

'What gum—?' He cocks an eyebrow toward Maglia, who makes his way through the room while Devaney stations himself at the doorway. I scan the room again. No Alex. Doris Damelin is close by, clutching a punch cup. 'Mrs. Damelin, I'm sorry.'

She looks away and down. 'You done what you could.'

Crystal holds a fistful of tiny tarts. 'The strawberry ones are already gone,' she says. "Hotty totty, but you need ten to get a real taste. Eating for two.' A tart goes in a gulp. She says, 'The old man drove us down."

"He's here?"

'Drivin' 'round somewhere. So when do I get this furniture? I been waitin' for the big phone call."

"I'll phone soon. I promise."

By the punch bowl, Leonard and Margaret stand with Eleanor Comber. Margaret's cane grins. 'Well done, Regina. In fact, lavish."

It's a rebuke for my out-of-bounds food and beverage selection. Leonard smiles. Drew and Dani, I see, are head-to-head in a far corner. And there's Stark, looking like the Secret Service. His coat sleeves are too short. I hope Ari Tsakis doesn't see him. The Greek and the biker do not mix.

I brush shoulders with Sarita. 'Drew tells me you helped edit his fine eulogy."

Edit? Her smile is distant. 'I majored in communication.

she says. "We studied a lot of speeches. Roosevelt is a great um, inspiration."

No wonder Drew's eulogy felt familiar. Ill fed, ill housed—they were spliced snippets from FDR. Stolen. I make my way to Vicky.

Oh, Regina, I worried about you, but Eleanor said you're fine.

"I was sore, but I'm okay."

"We've made changes. Visitors don't have to ride."

"Tell me, how is Diablo?" Drew told me what happened the night Diablo was injured. "I had no idea how much trouble Steven got himself into."

"Steven in trouble?"

"When Drew had to come help him. With Diablo."

She blinks. "You have it backwards. Of course, since you don't ride, you don't know a whiplash when you see it. Diablo was whipped. Not by Steve. Steve would never—" She moves away.

Drew, I see, is watching from the corner of his eye. I smile and wave, walk to the serving area, and take a salmon toast within earshot of Dani and Drew, still in their headlock.

"Get over it, Dani."

"*You* get over it."

He leans down and says something I can't hear. She turns bright red. I reach for a gooseberry tart. Brother and sister separate, Drew to his father, Dani to the mineral water. People are leaving. Lots of food is left, including Trudy's coconut bars.

I thank Gail Welch for the service as Dani Vogler comes my way, face flushed, eyes very bright. "Reggie, I haven't even said a real hello."

"Dani, the music was lovely. I don't know German, but we all felt the message."

"I thought Schubert would keep me safe."

"There's no safety from mourning."

She looks across the hall where her parents and stepmother and brother stand together. So, she says, by now you've talked to my mother and father and Margaret. And you talked to my brother too. You have their side. But you haven't got my side yet. So if you're interested—"

Anytime, I tell her.

"If you're free this evening—"

Seize the day—the night. After the reception, as it happens, I am free."

Meet me at the boathouse. It's my turn to lock up. Then we can go for a drink or something. She folds her arms. I'll tell you this much now. My brother went to parties on the *Shan-hai* too. And that eulogy about them being brothers—

"Yes."

"Well, they were more than brothers, Regina. Think about it. I'll see you around sundown."

Chapter Thirty-seven

I reach the Renfrew Rowing Club entrance just as a car pulls out of the boathouse driveway. My heart stops—it's a midnight blue Beemer convertible with Andrew Vogler at the wheel. He may have seen me. His tires squeal and spit gravel as he revs onto Storrow, heading upriver fast toward Newton in the left lane.

My heels wobble in the gravel as I approach the doors. I should've changed shoes. Is Dani here? A white Renfrew van is parked at the side. Maybe she drove it to the memorial service. Or maybe her brother dropped her off moments ago.

Suppose Drew comes back? He won't find us because I'll make sure we go for drinks right away. The huge barn type doors are closed. I try one. It gives. "Dani?" I open it just enough to poke my head in. "Dani?" My head's between the two doors. "Oh, Dani—Dani Vogler?"

She's not here yet. Maybe Drew came looking for her and left, which means he might return. The traffic rushes at my back side.

Only a few feet of space and a low guardrail separate me from on rushing cars. I step inside.

The last light through the dusty windows high in the rooftop gables barely shows outlines of the boats. The colors are fast fading to umber and grays. Against the wall the oars stand at attention in their regimental row.

It's quiet in here, though not calm. The traffic outside is a muffled roar, and the air—for one thing, it's cold but stuffy and still, as if the boathouse is biding its time, holding its breath. The floorboards are uneven. If the doors on the river side were open, there'd be fresh air and a burst of the western light of the setting sun.

It's so different from just days ago, when the boathouse was filled with those clean athletic bodies, the snappy orders to raise and lower boats. I peer into gloom to see the crane, which is barely outlined in the dusk. It looks primeval.

Dani? Dani? Hello, Dani Vogler, if you're here.

My voice swallows itself. There's not a trace of an echo. I wish I'd changed out of this suit.

The walls and rafters creak. Hello? Is anyone up there? Wood expands, right? Or does it contract? There's a small flashlight in my purse, but the beam disappears in the gloom of the gables. I crane my neck. The boats look like torpedoes.

Dani said sundown, so I utter thy name at the words. Ms. Cutter . . . I see your skirt."

"Dani? Where are you?"

"Here . . . at the back wall. I'm on a ladder."

I squint, shine my little light.

"Here . . . behind the boats."

The flashlight is useless. Out of eyes, a shadowy figure is coming down the far wall. I make out rungs and a thin calf, a muscled arm. "Didn't you hear me?"

'I was changing. There's a loft up there.'

I remember rafters, no loft. "You didn't hear me? I called your name."

She's in leggings and a fuzzy vest with pockets. "I heard you. I thought you were my brother."

Inches from my face, her eyes are wide. Wide with fear. "He came looking for me. I was up in the loft. I kept quiet until he went away. When I heard your voice, I thought he was back, trying to trick me."

"You were hiding from him?"

'I didn't move a muscle. You didn't see him, did you?'

"Driving away. I'm sure it was him."

'A blue convertible?' I nod. "That's him. He's not even allowed to come here. He's not a member. He plays squash and rides. He rides that poor horse like it's a bronco.'

"Diablo."

"But this is *my* place.' Dani stamps one foot as if planting a flag. "Dr. Vantag said so."

"Your crew coach?"

"Dr. Vantag is . . . my therapist."

"I see. Suppose we go for our drinks now. We can grab a bite."

She doesn't seem to hear me. "And he knows I plan to talk to you."

"Dr. Vantag?"

"No." Her voice rises to shrillness. "Not Dr. Vantag. Drew. Drew knows."

"You told him?"

"He just knows. He's my brother, he always *knows*." She rakes her nails along her arms. "He knew everything in my room, my diary. And my body. I was ten. He was so strong. I couldn't fight . . . *always*."

"Then let's go. My car's outside."

"What if he's waiting out there?"

"I don't think so."

Oh yes. He could go around Memorial Drive and cross the bridge and circle back. It just takes a few minutes this time of day, even in rush hour. He could be outside right now. He could be waiting."

"To do what?"

She doesn't answer.

Let's make a dash for it. Even in these heels? Yes, whatever it takes to calm her down. If Dani turns hysterical, I'll get nowhere. "Let's go to a hotel bar. How about Cambridge, the Charles Hotel? There's lots of security there. And it's warm." She hesitates. Another few minutes, it will be dark. "Let's go while there's still daylight."

"It's okay, Reggie. I know this boathouse. I could walk it in the dark in my sleep."

"But not in *my* sleep."

"I've even spent nights here. I roll out a sleeping bag, even in winter. The dark's no problem. It's cozier."

For me, however, claustrophobic.

She reaches into a vest pocket. "In case he comes back, I'm going to lock the Storrow side doors. I have the key."

"The doors where I came in?" She nods. "Can't we just go?"

"In case he sees your car. Don't you understand? In case he tries to get in here."

"But if we get going right now—"

"It's a precaution." She goes to the doors, and I hear a *chunk*. "Padlocked," she says. "He can't get in."

"Dani, we can't get out."

"Oh yes, by the river doors."

"To swim out? Or will you row us?"

Her laugh breaks the tension. I manage a laugh too. "It's okay,"

she says. "There's a side path over some stones beside the boat ramp. My brother doesn't know about it. I'll guide you."

"In my stocking feet?"

"Don't worry. It's safer."

"But it's getting really dark. And it's cold."

"It's twilight," she says. "If you spent as much time here as I do, you'd know the difference."

"So let's leave while it's . . . twilight. I'm thirsty."

"There's water. Right over there near our lockers. Wait." She disappears into the gloom, sidesteps the boats and the crane. On the uneven floorboards, her steps are sure-footed. She's back, handing me a bottle.

"Wow, real glass."

"Coach orders it. It's Finnish." She has one for herself.

I realize how thirsty I am. Outdoors, there's a gentle slap of the river water against the ramp. "Thanks. We drink. The lockup clearly has made Dani feel better. I tell myself again, a hysterical Dani Vogler would be useless. This boathouse is Dani's playhouse, the address she evidently calls home. Rock bottom fact: she feels safest here.

Meaning that she'll talk here. "Dani, why are you afraid of your brother?"

"Oh, Reggie, it's a long story. Tell you what—let's sit for a little while on the bench, okay? Like we did the other day. That was so nice."

Uneasily I say okay. It's pitch-dark in here, and there's no moon. The *dap-dap* of the river water on the ramp outside is nice enough, but the boat hulls surround us like a maze, and those suspended above look ghostly. The crane hovers. And now—that pulsing starts at my temple.

"You don't know Drew," she says. "You met him, but you don't know my brother. You got the official family version, the

wild child tamed when Steve joined the family circle. That's what you heard, isn't it?"

Our foreheads almost touch when I nod. "More or less."

"The truth is, my brother is cruel. He's violent. He was always that way. My father jokes about him throwing bricks in my crib, as if that was cute. I had a pet Siamese. Drew played doctor and cut her. I gave her away to save her life. He wanted to do things to me. I learned to stay away from him."

She drinks. "I loved riding, but it was dangerous at the barn. Do you think I liked playing field hockey? I hated it. I played those sports to get away from my brother. I took art lessons because it's a girl thing. He wouldn't come near. I faked the flu so I wouldn't have to see him."

"Dani, did you talk with your parents?"

"They wouldn't listen. They loved their myth: how great Steven was for their dear firstborn son. The divorce didn't change a thing. Besides, Margaret's weird. She has something going with Steven's ex, in case you didn't know."

"With Alex?"

"You should see her look at that guy, like there's nobody else in the universe. But my brother could care less. He games them all. He steals my mom's silver, my dad's guns. I think he steals from Margaret too."

"Guns? What kind of guns?"

"Western six shooters. My father comes from Nevada. Anything that's western, he's a fanatic. They blame the housecleaners, but it's Drew. My brother just hid himself better with Steve around. He's poison. He'd have been a Nazi. Drew'd do anything."

Dani, when you said Steven and Drew were more than brothers, what did you mean?"

Her sudden laugh is shrill.

"Why is that funny?" I ask.

"Just listen to you . . . because it just goes on and on . . . Drew, number one, the big topic. Here we sit in my house—the boathouse is my house—and it's all about my brother."

And about Steven. You sang at his memorial service a couple of hours ago. It's appropriate. It's right."

She pauses. "Steve talked to me about your aunt." Her voice drops to a hush. "About how she was psychic."

Yes."

"So that means she could, like, read minds?"

No, not necessarily. The word has many meanings." I wish I could see the expression on Dani's face. If only the moon would give us some light. "But my Aunt Jo was psychic, it's true."

"That must be fabulous."

"It's a gift."

"And you have it too? You go into a trance?"

"It's more intuitional . . . like daydreams. For me, the experience is . . . intense." Do I tell her my temple throbs at this very moment? That I see Steven colliding with a log and drowning? That my temple is pulsing? "No. Images. I say. Just different images, like a picture."

Cool." She taps the bottle against her palm. Dani has not answered my question about Steven and Drew.

Dani, let's go now. It's stuffy in here. I'm getting cold. We'll take my car. If you're worried, I can call a friend of mine. He's very physical. I'll call him."

Just let me put the bench back first." We stand, and I admire the easy swing of her muscular arms as I reach down for my bag. "Dani, I can't seem to find my bag. The little flashlight beam has died. Can you help find my bag? It's right here."

In the silence, there's a sudden whoosh of air. It's a glass bot-

tle. It grazes my scalp, catches my shoulder, and thunks to the floor and rolls. It was thrown.

"Dani—," I whisper, gasping. "Your brother—" Drew is here. He must be inside. "Dani? Dani, can you hear me?" No answer. "Dani?"

Something crunches. I know that sound. It's an oar pulled from a wall notch.

"Dani?"

There's silence. Then the oar—from the dark I sense it coming, piercing the gloom. It comes at me blade-first—a spear.

My God, it isn't Drew. It's Dani.

Chapter Thirty-eight

I dive, and splinters rake my palms and wrists and shins. I'm underneath a rack of boats and panting. My shoes are gone, nylons shredded. My jacket buttons strike the floor like marbles. The oar pokes like a broom. Is the blade to stab me? No, it's the handle grip. She wants to poke me out.

She tried to smash my head with a bottle? To beat me with an oar?

Why? Is she crazy? My heart pounds its message: get out of here.

The river side doors are my best chance. Yet my car keys in my bag, which Dani surely grabbed when she moved the bench. Stupid me. This was planned.

All of it? From the church? From before?

Why?

My palms and legs are on fire on the splintery floor. But the prodding oar has stopped. I'm flattened beneath the bottom row

of the longest shells. I do not see her feet. If I lie here, the night will move. Eventually, dawn.

No, this is a lull, not a truce. I have to do . . . something.

Get to the river doors. Get outside, across the rocks and around to Storrow, and flag down a car? No. She'll knock me down as I stumble on the stones. I'll have to swim for it. The Charles in New England in November? How many minutes to freezing?

First the doors—

But that's her plan, isn't it? . . . to wait until I dash. To let me roll the ramp door open—then strike.

Unless I beat her to it, make it outside first. My skirt zipper . . . unzip my skirt, slip out of it. It feels like an eternity. Spanters drive through the panty hose as I belly crawl out of the skirt and inch forward on this floor. From here to the sliding doors, it's eighteen feet of open flooring. The crane looms like a raptor.

But what if she has a gun? My mind goes white with fear. Think, Reggie. Think.

I'll take off my jacket, toss it out, and see if she shoots. My fingers tumble on the buttons, and the sleeves cling like skin . . . like a straitjacket. With clammy hands, at last I wad it up, cock my left arm sideways, then fling the bandage of wool with buttons and brooch that strike the floor.

Clack-n-clack . . . the buttons and brooch on the flooring.

And a hard *pam, pam* from above. It's not a gun. There's no smell of burned powder. I have no idea what the sound is. Perhaps a starting pistol for a boat race?

Pam.

With knees bent in a crouch, I get ready. It's one, two, and three.

I dash straight ahead, stepping high for footing on the bumpy

floor. Then *pam*. By my leg. *Pam*—like a needle near my head. *Pam, pam.*

My arm. It hit my arm. The flesh of my upper arm is a burning-hot rod. I'm sick at my stomach. I feel it pierce in and out like an arrow.

Like a nail. It's a nail. Dani is firing nails.

A nail gun.

I'm at the doors, grabbing an edge, pushing, shoving the door with all my might. It won't budge. Blood runs down my arm, my elbow. And now clouds are closing in, my mind a patchwork of clouds.

Reggie, focus every thought on this door. Fight the door, fight the clouds. Feel the wood, read it. The nail gun is quiet. Is Dani on the move? She's not behind me, but I feel her. And the door . . . the sliding doors won't give at all.

Because they're locked.

No, they're barred. I feel brackets and a plank. If I can lift the plank from the brackets, I can get out.

Another sound starts now, a grinding, a motor. I clutch the plank and push up, but it falls back down into the bracket.

Grind, grind . . .

Then I see it coming. It's the crane. It cradles something long and narrow in the slings. It's poised above me. It swings overhead where I claw at this plank. It swings over my head.

And the shape in the slings—a wood shed. It's coming down at my head from the highest rafters, from where I first saw it in the daylight days ago. It's wood and long and rounded on the bottom—and now I understand.

Like a log.

My head pulses like a drum.

It's the log, the log that hit Steven. It's coming at me. It's ten feet above, then five, then—

With one big heave, I thrust the plank up. *Up.* It falls away, and the door slides just as the log grazes my head and I stumble down the ramp and, once in the water, begin stroking to swim in the icy Charles River.

The current takes me, though I'm numb, my bleeding arm useless, teeth chattering. I kick, swallowing mouthfuls of rank river. My knees and arms bang on rocks downstream as I fight to get ashore. My toes sink into icy muck, but I claw my way up to the guardrail.

Cars are streaming by in the darkness, their headlights blinding. Horns blare, but nobody stops. If Dani comes after me—or Drew? If they're in this together—

A Jeep slows and races on. They all race on. My poor bleeding arm. My scalp is freezing. Where are the cops? One car veers to the guardrail, to the shoulder beside me. One headlight is out.

No, it's not not a car, but a motorcycle. The rider in a helmet. Visor up. He's dismounting, pulling off his leather jacket at the rail. Put this on. It's half bark, half growl. Lifting, he's lifting my body over the guardrail. He's tying a kerchief around my arm.

I cannot speak.

"Here, put the helmet on." As if I'm a child. The leather jacket comes to my knees. I smell Camels. Atlantic eyes, the ginger hair. "I said, let's put the helmet on."

"Stark."

He lifts me up. "Hang on tight, Cutter."

"Don't know if I can."

"Damn right you can. Hell of a spot to hitchhike, Cutter. Hell, of a night to go for a swim."

Chapter Thirty-nine

I refuse to present myself as the walking wounded here at the precinct house. I'm a deputy volunteer, not a casualty. In a necktie patterned with frogs, Frank Devaney gives me his signature look—patient, bemused, exasperated. Magha is the grail master. "So you went to the boathouse solely to gather information? You did not expect to confront Danielle Vogler?"

"How many times do I have to answer this?" Detective Magha. I enjoy life. I would not knowingly volunteer to be murdered."

"You had no reason at the time to think Danielle was involved in Damelin's death?"

"Of course not. But suddenly I get it. They want to know, how did I manage to get one jump ahead of them? It's as if we competed to solve the murder, and I won. Frankly, though, didn't I win? Nearly killed, but first to the finish line. Sort of."

"And when she attacked you with the bottle and nail gun—"

"And a wood shell lowered deliberately to strike my head."

"And you say you were picked up by a friend who just hap-

pened to come along on a motorcycle?" Incredulity drips in Maglia's every syllable.

Someone who's helped me with my dog and other tasks. He attended the memorial service and grew concerned about my whereabouts. *Mark* is on the tip of my tongue, but I don't say his name at this moment. "Could I ask you something?" Maglia says a curt yes. "Could I ask how you think Dani killed Steven? That, you see, is the police theme so far today. Dani the killer."

They exchange glances. Finally Devaney speaks. "It looks as though the perpetrator did this crime in two stages, starting at the Renfrew boathouse. As we see it, Steven Damelin came to the boathouse, just as you did, to meet Danielle Vogler on the night of his death. In the course of things, she deliberately swung a cradled boat at his head, which knocked him semiconscious. Then she pushed him into the water."

"But how could she possibly get Steven's body back to his apartment?" There was no blood on the stairs. Besides, he was nailed to his apartment floor. *Nailed*, like the upholstery of a sofa." As my arm was nailed. The *pain, pain* of the gun is mentally indelible. Under the bandage, my arm still hurts, though the doctor and X-ray technician congratulated me on a flesh wound that missed vital nerves, bone, and blood vessels. "So he drowned, and you think—"

"No, he didn't drown. Just as you didn't."

"But if he was unconscious—"

"He came to. He was drifting with the current, just as you did, and he managed to get to shore. He was weakened and cold."

But how did he get to Barlow Square? In a taxi?

Maglia looks sly. "We located a driver who picked up a man along Storrow that Tuesday night. The driver thought he was

drunk because the man was soaking wet and incoherent. He got the address from his wallet and took him home.

"To 27 Barlow Square? How did you find the taxi driver?"

"We're detectives, Ms. Cutter. We investigate. That's what people like yourself pay us to do." The moment sours.

"That still doesn't explain how he got — nailed." I wince at the word.

Maglia says, "We theorize that Dani Vogler saw Steven come out of the river and decided to follow him to his apartment to finish what she started."

"And he let her in? After she nearly killed him?"

"She appealed to their closeness over many years. She begged to come in and apologize and explain and help him. He was very weak. She brought the drill and went to work."

"And he couldn't fend her off because he didn't have the strength?"

They both nod. Devaney says, "She saw leather strips and tied them on his wrists to implicate his ex-lover. But the drill wasn't her weapon of choice. Reggie." He pauses. "It was the nail gun."

"The Crowninshed nail gun."

"As I believe you know."

I nod. My arm aches up and down. "Then what about the Chinese calligraphy on my door? It means death trip, you know."

"It means pineapple." Maglia and I stare at one another.

Devaney says, "It was probably a deliberate diversion. We understand that Ms. Vogler is something of an artist."

"She took art classes. And she lettered the family holiday cards. The gallery art supposedly sheltered her from her brother, though I didn't think to connect Dani's calligraphy to my door. It wouldn't be hard to work up Chinese characters, would it? And how about that *Warrior Hardware* with the threatening note? Did she shove it into my mail slot?"

"We think so. At this time, we believe she acted alone. We also think she tried to run you down the day you moved in."

Dani in the blue car. But why? Why kill Steven—or me? I can't believe her brother had nothing to do with this. Andrew Vogler is corrupt. He lies. He might be involved."

"We won't rule him out yet. But, Reggie, motives can twist down deep. You say this woman was passionate about rowing. She had another passion."

They wait for me to add it up. "Not Steven?"

"Steven."

"His Helping Hand scheme—was she involved?"

"We doubt it."

She told me she met Luis Diaz. Steven wanted her to teach him rowing. He's in the Helping Hand video. Have you found it?"

Not yet. We're looking. We're also pursuing the phone numbers on that Corsair sheet. You're right, Reggie, it's a moocher list of elderly women. We're looking into whether Damelin worked alone or had accomplices."

But Luis had nothing to do with Steven's death, right? They nod. And Dani's passion—it wasn't about money, it was love? They nod. But he's gay. . . . Then I recall the prom photo, Steven and Dani. Oh, that's it. You're saying she felt betrayed?"

And abandoned. She was in love with Steven but jealous of the attention her family gave him. It takes a psychiatrist to make sense of this, but her loving Steven was a way to try to get closer to her parents."

So when she learned that he was gay, she felt more exiled than ever?"

Isolated, yes." Devaney nods. "When Damelin and Alex Ribideau ended their relationship, we think she probably hoped Damelin would turn to her. A new window of opportunity would open.

But it didn't," I say. "And she felt more alone than ever." Again, they nod. And that was enough to trigger the murder.

Maglia says, "We have reason to believe that Andrew Vogler was involving himself in the gay men's scene with Steven. We think her discovery of that involvement was the trigger."

Because it excluded her totally. And betrayed her hopes. And made a fool of her."

"Humiliated her, yes," says Maglia, who gives me a grudging nod.

"I have a certain photograph of Andrew Vogler," I say. "It could be useful evidence. I'll give it to you." I look from Devaney to Maglia. "Have you got actual evidence against her?"

"On a warrant, we recovered a nail gun—and a crowbar."

"And we're looking for climbing shoes. Rock climbing shoes."

Not ballet. Not Alex Ribideau. So Stark was right. "Then it was Dani who climbed my wall the night of the storm. But why? Why me?"

"It's the psychic thing, Reggie. She knew about your aunt's psychic ability."

"Yes. Dani first brought up Jo's paranormal ability that afternoon we first spoke at the boathouse. Steven had told her about it. She seemed intrigued and called it cool. She asked me what it's like. I told her a little."

"You also confirmed to her that you're psychic."

"I did, yes. But why attack me?"

"Because she believed that sooner or later you'd learn, as a psychic, the identity of Steven's killer. She was sure your psychic power would expose her."

So she tried to run me down before she killed him. I'd have been . . . a preliminary murder."

They nod. "Then he tried to kill you *after* killing Steven."

"With the crowbar. And my shot at her missed."

'You better appreciate that fact, Ms. Cutter." Maglia glowers. "We'd have to consider charging you."

Devaney leans closer. "But in a way, she was right. Your clairvoyant ability worked. Your vision involved water and this log shape. You saw these things. They were major clues." This statement, I am sure, is meant for Maglia's ears.

Devaney jots a note. Maglia frowns. They rise. I rise. Devaney walks me out. We're on the granite step. My arm throbs. "Reggie, you did good. But we need to work together. Next time, we'll do better."

Next time. *Next time.* This is music to my ears, a waltz, rock and roll, samba. "No more murders at Barlow Square, Frank."

"The case I'm thinking about is near the harbor."

The case?

"It might involve crystal meth, but I have my doubts. If your aunt was still with us . . . anyway, we can talk when you feel better."

"I feel just fine."

"Another time, Reggie. I'll come by for the photograph. You take care of that arm."

My whole self is one giant ache and pain, but I drive home on cloud nine.

I park beside the familiar cherry-red Harley. On my front step Stark lights a Camel and blows smoke rings into the November air. "Having a tea party with the cops? You need a better class of friends, Cutter. How's the arm?"

Fine.

"Is that lady talk for 'hurts like hell'?"

"Like hell. And it's time for my Percodan."

"Watch that stuff. People get hooked."

I open the door. "Stark, you're not my nanny."

He takes a drag and crushes the cigarette. Some call it taking care of business." That sneer of his. "Do I get my jacket back?"

Come in. You deserve more than your jacket."

"Hey, I'll tell you what, we'll swap. Hold the door." He goes into the motorcycle saddlebag, bounds up the steps two at a time and dangles a ten-pound sack as Biscuit goes crazy to see him. I read the label. One Earth Naturals. What is it?

"Dog food." He scratches her belly. "It's a better diet for Biscuit now that she's going back in training. I'm thinking the lamb with brown rice, barley, baby carrots."

"*Baby carrots?* For a dog?"

"A triathlon dog. Here's your mail, Cutter." He scoops it up. "So who's in Beirut?"

I grab the card, an aerial view of the Mediterranean. Hi. Regina. A Lebanese signature dish is *samek harra*, a garlic fish with pine nuts. Double in Boston. Let's discuss. Yrs, Knox.

"Cutter, your face is red."

"Stark, you need to mind your own business."

His eyes narrow. "I need to help with your dose of dope."

In fact, I feel light-headed as he guides me to a front room chair and sprints for water and a pill and Biscuit jumps into my lap.

"H-O, Cutter."

"Isn't this where we came in?"

"It's the year of the rerun." He watches me swallow the pill and asks, "What are you looking at?"

"That bottle on the top shelf. I mean, flask."

"Where?" He twists to see. "That old green whiskey bottle?"

"It's a souvenir, I say. "It's from the Bread and Roses Strike you told me about. It's about courage and... an immigrant bloodline that self-destructed, that bottomed out over generations."

"That sounds deep."

"I guess there are no guarantees."

"For what? You want brave hearts in fancy pants? Forget it. You want a rundown on who built America, go for the real backbones."

"What do you mean?"

I mean like the bogtrotters and swamp Yankees. They had to hack it themselves. They still do."

Beneath that weathered complexion, do I detect a blush? "You sound personal, Stark." He empties my water glass. "I know bogtrotters are the immigrant Irish. I say, "Are you part Irish?"

"Could be."

"But what's a swamp Yankee?"

He meets my gaze. "The Yankees that didn't have a dime. They lived in the backwoods and fought in the Revolution. They're stubborn and independent. They farmed. They're not afraid to get their hands dirty. They're the real deal to this day."

"Do their descendants ride Harleys?"

"Vehicle of choice, Cutter. You live by the right code, you live proud. You never get rich, but you answer the call as you hear it. So what the hell, Cutter, you want me to pull that historical bottle down for you?"

No, let it be up there. It's a lesson. The past sends its messages, and we need to hear them. As I hear you now, Stark." He leans toward the dog. Yes, that coppery cast to his cheek, it's definitely a blush. Biscuit licks my wrist, and I nuzzle her. My nose clogs from the damn allergy as she looks at me with those soft brown eyes, so very—so very *beagle*.

"Cutter, don't you go weepy on me."

It's an allergy attack, Stark. It's from animal dander."

"I'll take the girl out for a run," he says.

"Joint custody, partner."

"Joint custody, partner." He gets her leash and puts his jacket on. I smell leather, Camels, hospital gauze. I'll have a scar, the doctors say. Devaney and the murder near the harbor cross my mind, and I reread the card about Lebanese garlic fish. Bring it on, I think. I'm back from the dead, alive alive-o. Bring it on. Bring it all on.

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AN UNANTICIPATED FEELING BEGINS, LIKE A HAND ON MY SHOULDER...

It squeezes gently at first, then harder, like a clamp. I sit up, trying to push back a teary blur. The blur yields to double vision as shapes form. Eyes wide open, I'm now in two places at once. This is my apartment, my floor, but in my mind there's blue-brown water and a pale floating log. The watery scene sweeps me in. Calm on the surface, the currents beneath are roiling. Whirlpools suck at my arms and legs. My head reels from a hard blow from the log. This is a drowning place. My lungs...my own lungs are filling as my chest burns...

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ISBN 0-89296-797-8
52495
EAN
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